

THE SECRET OF THE ZODIAC

by

JULIAN STERNE



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BOSWELL PUBLISHING CO., LTD.
10 ESSEX STREET, LONDON, W.C.2
1933

“So you see, my dear Coningsby, that the world is governed by very different personages from what is imagined by those who are not behind the scenes.”—DISRAELI.

*Made and Printed in Great Britain
by Hazell, Watson & Viney Ltd.
London and
Aylesbury*

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CHAPTER I

A POLITICAL DÉBUTANT

It was a warm night in May, and Sir Alfred and Lady Frensham were giving one of their dull dinners at the House of Commons.

There was really no reason why their parties should be dull. Sir Alfred, Conservative member for Westborough, was a cheery man, still on the right side of fifty, very popular in the county, and particularly in the hunting field, whilst Lady Frensham, with her charming smile and attractive clothes, had made herself beloved by every class of the constituency. Neither were the guests at her parties altogether of a boring kind. But they were badly sorted. Living in a perpetual whirl of political and social functions, Lady Frensham had no time to consider which of her guests would be congenial to each other. So, when giving dinners, she had fallen into the habit of ticking off a list of the people who were "owed invitations" and then arranging them round the table as she would have played a hand of cards, following the same suit—a duke's daughter next to a marquis, a baronet next to a knight's widow, a plain captain next to an untitled spinster, and so on.

Consequently, this evening the ethereal Lady Daphne Medway, whose poems were the rage in high-

brow circles, was obliged to sit mutely beside the plethoric old Lord Kilbain, who thought it affected to talk of anything but hunting prospects, whilst Mrs. Blitheroe, whose weather-beaten complexion spoke of long runs across country in the teeth of a winter gale, was vainly endeavouring to make herself understood by a rising young Italian novelist who spoke only two words of English.

Major Terence Kavanagh, prospective Conservative candidate for South Mershire, looking round the table, wondered why people should take the trouble to give dinners and then not make them more convivial. If only Lady Daphne had been placed next to Antonio Grigio, and Mrs. Blitheroe next to Lord Kilbain, if only he himself were next to Rosamund Dare, the one girl who during the short time he had been back in London had really interested him, that would have been a dinner-party worth turning out for. Under such circumstances it might even have been possible to forget the deficiencies of the House of Commons *menu*. As it was, he found himself flanked on one side by Mrs. Murray Bateman, wholly monopolised by her right-hand neighbour, and on the other by Myra—the young and extremely animated daughter of the multi-millionaire, Sir Paul Greenworthy—whom but for Rosamund on the other side of the table he might have found attractive. But in his present mood Myra's scintillations rather tired him, and it was a relief when Mrs. Bateman, at last released by the member for Downborough, turned towards him with a sigh and murmured :

“ I've been having such a terrible dose of statistics, Major Kavanagh, do tell me something amusing to take the taste away.”

Mrs. Murray Bateman, wife of the member for Ludford, was very popular in "the Party." She had done so many things—worked in a hospital in France during the war, interviewed the Kaiser for a Sunday newspaper, dined with Bela Kun in Budapest, bathed with Mussolini; it was said she had even penetrated into the heart of Thibet disguised as the wife of a Chinese mandarin, though there were cynics who unkindly shrugged their shoulders at her accounts of this last exploit. And since she knew every good restaurant in Paris, Vienna, and New York, had met every celebrated author, musician, actor, scientist, and film star, and entertained every visiting foreign celebrity at her marvellously decorated house in Curzon Street, there was no one more in request than Mrs. Murray Bateman whenever one wanted to get up an entertainment, run a cabaret ball, or organise a bazaar in aid of Party funds. She knew exactly how things should be done, and who should be asked to do them, and as she never held any special opinions on Party differences, she was able to retain her popularity with all the various coteries that made up official Conservative society. Cabinet Ministers adored her. Whilst other women plied them with tiresome questions on affairs of State, Mrs. Murray Bateman could be safely trusted to lead the conversation at dinner over country where lay no pitfalls, so that a weary minister could throw off restraint and let himself go without the fear of unguardedly committing himself to some expression of opinion.

Kavanagh, however, not being a minister, but a soldier not long home from service in India and still in the first flush of his political enthusiasm, listened with some impatience whilst Mrs. Bateman talked to him of the

charming little spot she had heard of in Austria, where she hoped to find rest and peace after the London season, of the marvellous Roumanian pianist she had discovered, and of the latest volume of Memoirs which had just appeared, and was said to be so scandalous that quite a lot of libel actions might be expected.

All this might be amusing enough in normal times, but in this year of 1934, with the fate of the Empire in the balance, some discussion of more vital questions might be expected. Yet in spite of the failure of the "National Party" since it had taken office—with Mr. Nelson Parbury, a leading Conservative, as Prime Minister—to solve the grave problems confronting the nation, no one seemed in the least disturbed.

Still, one could not accuse these people of being idlers. The women particularly seemed to be extremely busy with charitable and political work. Kavanagh could hear snatches of their conversation all round the table :

"Dear Florrie, isn't she wonderful? Were you at her party to meet the Prime Minister? . . . Yes, I always think her *chef* is *quite* the best in London. . . . We've got six film stars to come and help at our bazaar for the Mothers' Conservative Guild next month. It ought to be a success. . . . We really must get dear old Tommy in at the Westshire by-election."

Then someone said plaintively :

"Poor Lady Winkmere, she sent out five hundred invitations to a drawing-room meeting for the Young Imperialists' League, and only fifty people came! All those rows and rows of gilt chairs empty! And she had two Cabinet Ministers to speak!"

"Yes, so disappointing, wasn't it? And even some

of the fifty crept out in the middle of the Home Secretary's speech. No, I wasn't there myself ; it was the day of the Sandmarket Stakes, you know."

" Well, anyhow, the cabaret ball for the League was a great success. Such a crowd ! Poor Mrs. Parbury got jammed in the doorway and had to be taken home in an ambulance."

Kavanagh was wondering whether anybody bothered about the objects of the Young Imperialist League or of the Mothers' Conservative Union and how Tommy's success at the polls would affect the destinies of the nation, when old Lady Kilbain leant across the table and said earnestly :

" Oh, Major Kavanagh, I do hope you're coming to the meeting for the Dogs' Borstal ! "

" The Dogs' Borstal ? " Kavanagh repeated in a puzzled tone.

" Yes. Hadn't you heard about it ? Lady Lutterworth's getting it up. She feels it's so hard that a dog should only be allowed *one* bite. If there was a Dogs' Borstal he could be sent to and placed under good influences he might become quite a reformed character. And then it would give work to some of the unemployed ! "

" So that, if he still felt like biting he could bite the unemployed ? " Kavanagh could not help remarking.

But Lady Kilbain looked shocked and said : " Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't want to do that. There'd be nothing to irritate him at a nice, kind Home. *Do* come to the meeting on Friday ! "

Only towards the end of dinner the Conservative set-backs in the provinces came under discussion.

" All want of organisation," Mr. Oscar Franklin observed impressively.

Everyone turned respectfully in his direction. The multi-millionaire was the guest of the evening. Born some fifty years ago in Frankfurt, he had migrated in early youth to the United States and had assumed American citizenship. But at the age of forty he had developed a keen interest in the affairs of Great Britain, and acquired the habit of spending the season in London. After buying a magnificent house in Carlton House Terrace, and renting a grouse moor, he proceeded to inaugurate and finance a campaign for "elevating films," and for some reason, not apparent to the general public, had become *persona grata* in official Conservative circles. On arrival in England he never failed to pay a visit to the Central Office of the Party in Palace Chambers, where he was received with particular deference, and remained long closeted with the Chairman. Although he played no official part in political life, he had become a personage of no small importance, and always spoke of "we" in referring to the Party. Accompanied by his son Isidore, a young man with a Charlie Chaplin moustache, he provided the *pièce de résistance* at the Frenshams' dinner-party. Consequently, when he opened his lips to speak, everyone listened to him as to an oracle.

"Organisation is what we need," Oscar Franklin went on, nodding his head sagaciously at the dinner-table. "And for organisation we must have enthusiasm. The curse of the Party is *apathy*."

"Yes, indeed!" came in a murmured chorus.

"The British people," Franklin continued in the same impressive tone, "seem to have no conception of the value of their heritage. With an Empire extending all over the face of the globe, they're content to

exist as if it was still the Elizabethan era—thinking only of cakes and ale. What they need,” and he thumped the table with his fist, “is to be made to think imperially ! ”

“ Oh, my dear Franklin, you’ll never get the working classes to do that ! ” Mr. Murray Bateman observed with a shrug of the shoulders. “ It isn’t in their nature.”

“ The working classes,” retorted Franklin, “ are sheep. They follow where they’re led. All they want is leaders. But we’ve got no brains in the Party—no brains, I tell you ! ”

The words were frankly rude and spoken without a disarming geniality of manner. But no one remonstrated ; the great financier was too influential to be treated with anything but deference.

“ What we need,” he added emphatically, “ is a Disraeli.”

“ Oh, of course,” several voices agreed.

“ All the same,” Sir Alfred Frensham said cheerfully, fortified by a hearty dinner and several glasses of champagne, “ we’re not doing so badly. Of course we’ve lost a good many seats, but we can afford that. Our former majority was a bit unwieldy. It will be easier now to agree on policy.”

“ But don’t you think,” Kavanagh said, joining for the first time in the conversation, “ that the Labour Party are gaining ground rather rapidly ? ”

“ Oh, perhaps. But that doesn’t matter. The Labour Party have become eminently reasonable. We’ve nothing to fear in that direction. The great thing is to avoid antagonising them.”

Everyone—or nearly everyone—murmured approval. It was so pleasant to feel one need not worry, and that

one could get on with the hunting or whatever else one happened to like doing without bothering one's head about affairs of State. Only Kavanagh, remembering the howls he had heard arising from the Labour benches during the debate he had attended that afternoon, had the temerity to ask :

" But aren't the Labour Party already antagonistic ? Surely you wouldn't describe Hanley as exactly conciliatory ? "

" Not apparently, perhaps," said Sir Alfred Frensham cheerfully. " Of course, they've got to keep up a pretence of opposition to satisfy their constituents, but really they're the best fellows in the world. Take Bagnall, for instance, there isn't a better Imperialist in the country."

" My dear Frensham," said Franklin in the lightly patronising tone that was beginning to irritate Kavanagh, " Bagnall knows very well which side his bread is buttered. These Labour men are all the same. Give them plenty to eat and, above all, plenty to drink, a motor-car, and so on, and they're yours."

" Well, I must say I think better of them," said Sir Alfred. " I believe they're thoroughly sound at heart."

" Dear General Brighorn said something that struck me so much the other day," said old Lady Kilbain, leaning forward and looking earnestly at Sir Alfred ; " someone was talking about the danger of revolution in England, and General Brighorn said : ' No fear of that. Trust to the common sense of the working man.' I thought that so interesting."

Kavanagh, glancing at Oscar Franklin, caught the quick flash of derision that passed across the prominent black eyes of the financier, and shone out even more

intensely in those of his son Isidore, who remained silent throughout the conversation.

"What fools they think us all!" Kavanagh said angrily to himself, "and so we are!"

But Sir Alfred answered heartily:

"Quite so, quite so, Lady Kilbain. Brighorn's perfectly right. The working man is not in the least revolutionary. A better feeling between Labour and Capital and all will be well."

"That can never be brought about as long as the present system exists," said Dudley Milverton, one of the "rising" young men of the Party, in the lofty tone of one who realises that he alone amongst those present knows the true solution to the point under discussion. "The terms Capital and Labour are now completely obsolete. All such class distinctions must be done away with. The *rentier* class, of course, must disappear—this is inevitable in the course of evolution. It is for us to hasten the process, and make way for the new order."

Kavanagh listened in bewilderment. Was he at a Conservative dinner-party or a meeting of the I.L.P.? The only person to express robust Imperialist sentiments was the American millionaire. The rest seemed ready to acquiesce in any policy however defeatist rather than appear "reactionary"—the one thing to be avoided. Would they all be content to "disappear" when it came to the point? he wondered. At any rate no one expressed dissent. So, as there seemed no comment to be made on the impending cataclysm foretold by the last speaker, Lady Frensham judged it the moment to catch old Lady Kilbain's faded eye and rise from the table. The whole party moved out together on to the terrace to enjoy the

peaceful beauty of the spring night. Kavanagh, leaning back in his chair, amused himself watching the heterogeneous crowd that passed before his eyes—country cousins, natives of India, American tourists, being introduced to the Mother of Parliaments, principally by "Labour" members, who entered into their rôles of hosts with particular fervour. The older M.P.s, especially the Conservatives, sauntering past with their hands in their pockets, looked, for the most part, bored. Not so, however, Sarah Marchmont, the Girton girl who, after taking a brilliant first in mathematics, had successfully contested Lamington as a Conservative, and was now engaged in a lively discussion with the Minister of Agriculture.

"There's that tiresome Miss Marchmont!" murmured Lady Frensham, turning to Kavanagh. "She's evidently buttonholed poor Mr. Framlingham—how terrible for him!"

"Isn't she the woman who started the Corps of Speakers to go about the country and lecture on Imperial questions? It seemed to me a first-rate idea."

"Oh yes, that's her hobby," said Mrs. Murray Bateman. "Before the last election everybody asked one about Miss Marchmont's Corps. One got so bored with it. Ah, Mr. Barrington," she went on, playfully pulling the coat tail of a passing Conservative member, "I hope you're coming to our Ascot party? You never answered my invitation, you know!"

"Didn't I, dear lady? How very remiss of me. But I'm coming all the same."

Kavanagh turned away and looked across at Rosamund Dare.

"Come and take a turn up the terrace and watch the river," he said.

Rosamund rose with her usual air of gentle languor, and together they wandered to the balustrade looking out over the Thames, where the lights from the buildings on the opposite bank and from passing barges glittered on the smooth-running dark surface of the water.

"So you're going to stand for Parliament?" Rosamund said with a smile.

"Yes; do you think I'm a fool to do it?"

"No; I think it's splendid of you. But——"

"But what?"

"Well, somehow I don't imagine you'll be very popular with the Party."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll make them think. They'll hate that. I believe thinking really hurts them," she added with a laugh that took the edge off the satire.

Kavanagh turned and looked at Rosamund's clear profile, outlined against the darkness of the sky, with wondering curiosity. Was this really the same Rosamund he remembered long ago when they used to play together as children in a London square? She used to be such a jolly little thing with her crop of red-gold curls and laughing eyes—the beauty of the garden. All the little boys adored her.

She was beautiful still, with a strange half-sad, half-mocking beauty—flexible lips that curved upwards or drooped according to her mood, grey eyes that still could laugh, but more often had a curious veiled expression as if they had looked on things they wished to see no more. What had happened to her during all those years he had been away? Until his

return two months ago they had never met since she was sixteen. Now she must be about twenty-eight. Why had she never married? He had heard that she had been at college and was regarded as rather a "highbrow" by her set. Somehow he felt that she had passed through experiences which had left their mark on her. What were they? He longed to know.

"What ages ago it all seems!" he said, thinking aloud. "I feel like Rip van Winkle coming back to London and finding everything so changed. The same things and people, but all so different. I can hardly believe you're really little Rosamund whom——" he stopped short with a smile. Dare he remind her how they used to play at weddings, and how they two were married in the summer-house by Jimmy Brandon, dressed as a parson in one of the nursery-maid's aprons? And he had twisted a purple crocus round her finger for a ring. But evidently Rosamund remembered, for she said with a laugh only faintly tinged with embarrassment:

"We were terribly sentimental in those days, weren't we? Of course, at eight or ten one goes through that phase."

"And gets it over? The girls and boys to-day certainly don't seem much troubled with sentiment once they're grown up. Think of nothing but getting from one place to another. All motion and no emotions. I say, how's that for an epigram?"

"I think it's rather good. But perhaps they're wise."

"D'you remember," Kavanagh went on after a pause, still reminiscing, "the secret societies we used to have in the garden? One had to take a fearful

oath which made the others wild to know what it was all about."

Had he imagined it, or did a shadow pass over her face as he asked the question? She did not answer, but turned it off by saying:

"I remember that you and Jimmy Brandon swore eternal friendship and sealed it in blood by pricking your fingers with a pin."

"So we did. Under the laurel bushes. Jimmy and I were tremendous pals in those days—and afterwards."

"Rather an odd boy, wasn't he?"

"Well, perhaps being brought up abroad made him different from the rest of us. Went to school at Stuttgart, I remember. Then was through the end of the war and badly wounded. I haven't seen him since, though we've written to each other. He was really the best pal I ever had."

They were silent for a few moments. Then Kavanagh said, drawing nearer to Rosamund so that his coat sleeve touched the smooth white arm resting on the balustrade:

"I wonder what you're thinking about, Rosamund? There's something Sphinx-like about you. We've met quite often since I've been back in London, yet I never seem to know you any better."

She smiled—just gently enough to give him courage to go on.

"I feel," he said, "like someone standing in the hall of a house they know. The rooms seem quite familiar, bright and jolly, lit up by sunshine. But somewhere in the house there's a room I've never been into. I don't even know where it is. I only feel it's there."

"Perhaps it's a haunted room."

She breathed rather than spoke the words, and Kavanagh turning his head saw that her dark eyes were full of terror, like a child's in the dark. He put out his hand instinctively to clasp hers, but at that moment the hearty voice of Sir Alfred Frensham broke in behind them.

"Come along, you two, I want to introduce you to some of my Labour friends."

And remorselessly he shepherded the errant couple back to the flock.

The dinner-party had now gathered round a small table for coffee and cigarettes, and Mrs. Bateman was smiling prettily at the two Labour members Sir Alfred had drawn into the group. Jos. Bagnall, of the Miners' Federation, was beaming genially as his thick fingers closed around the expensive cigar held out to him by Oscar Franklin, but Hanley's tight lips gave no hint of a smile as he declined the proffered luxury. He was a teetotaller and non-smoker—one of the rare ascetics of the Labour movement—and after replying curtly to Lady Frensham's overtures, moved away with scarcely concealed contempt.

Kavanagh, watching his retreating form, observed to Rosamund: "There goes a potential Robespierre. He'd have us all guillotined without a qualm."

"Yes, that's why poor Lady Lutterworth keeps on asking him to lunch with her in Belgrave Square. She says if these people really want to cut off our heads, we'd better make friends with them. But Hanley never goes."

"I rather admire him for that. He's got the courage of his opinions and observes the rules of warfare. No

fraternising between the trenches! After all, this isn't a game."

"No. But our Party likes to think it is."

Suddenly Kavanagh heard himself greeted by a cheery voice: "Why, Major, don't you remember me?" And turning in its direction he saw a sturdy figure in tweed taking a seat at his side.

"Hullo, Cragg, is it you?" he answered, grasping the large hand held out to him. Could this really be Tom Cragg, the gallant miner who had served under him during the war? "By Jove, I'm glad to see you again. But what are you doing here?"

"Didn't you know? I'm Labour member for North Warmshire now."

"The devil you are, Cragg. I always said you'd get on. But not in this line of business! How d'you like it?"

"It's all right," said Cragg unenthusiastically. And pulling a somewhat foul pipe out of his pocket he added: "No good expecting too much, is it?"

"You don't believe in the Socialist millennium, Cragg?"

"I don't know anything about millenniums, or Socialism either, but I'd like to make the old country a bit better than we found it."

"Well, we'd all like to do that."

"Aye, *you* would, Major. But what about the rest of them?" He drew his chair closer and said in a low, confidential voice: "I can tell you, when I think of the misery down there"—he jerked his head towards the river—"in dockland, and up in the mines, and then read in the papers about society at play—always at play, whilst others can't get work, it makes me fairly sick."

"Oh, I know the society papers are the best recruiting organs for Socialism. But the poor fellows who read them in the public libraries can't know that the people who do nothing but play are only a very small minority."

"And they can't know either that if we put all those people in a lethal chamber to-morrow our class would be no better off," Cragg answered with a grim smile. "Still, there's something wrong somewhere."

"No doubt there's lots wrong—the trouble is, how to alter it," said Kavanagh rather helplessly, wondering what more he could say. But Cragg saved him the trouble of thinking out further arguments by saying:

"Well, I must be off. Good night, Major."

"Good night, and I say, let's meet again. I'm standing for Parliament too, you see. And though we're on different sides, I'm sure we're both out for the same cause. Perhaps we could help each other."

"That's right. I'll come along one day."

Kavanagh gave him his card and sat down again wondering at himself. Only five minutes ago he had said: "No fraternising between the trenches," yet here he was palling up with a Labour member whom somehow he could not regard as an enemy. Indeed, he felt uncomfortably that he had more in common with him than with the members of his own Party at dinner, and that the few minutes' conversation with Cragg had brought the first serious note into an evening which, but for the presence of Rosamund, would have been utterly futile and unprofitable.

But it was growing late; the House had already risen, and the party now broke up and made their way through the long stone halls, almost in darkness,

to the entrance where a row of cars was waiting. Into the most luxurious of these, an Isotta Fraschini, driven by a negro chauffeur, stepped Oscar Franklin and his son Isidore.

Meanwhile Kavanagh had managed to place himself again by Rosamund and to see her into a taxi. As she drove away he watched her face at the window, looming like a white flower against the blackness of the cab.

CHAPTER II

COMRADES IN ARMS

MAJOR TERENCE KAVANAGH was a young man whom the world in general regarded as phenomenally lucky. Tall, handsome, with charming manners, an un-failing gaiety of temperament, inherited from his Irish ancestors, he was as popular with men as with women, and since, to crown all, he was the happy possessor of a digestion that functioned perfectly, he found the world a very pleasant place to live in. If not born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he had had one placed in it firmly at an age when he was able to appreciate its value, for at thirty-five, after eighteen years in the Army, he found himself the heir to an uncle's estates in Mershire, and turned his back on India to take up the peaceful life of a "country gentleman."

But England, on closer acquaintance, seemed to be far from peaceful, for the failure of succeeding Governments to carry out their pledges had spread an unsettled feeling throughout the country. Nobody knew what was going to happen next; industry and agriculture were hampered by the sense of insecurity, and recurring strikes added to the confusion.

Kavanagh, who had hitherto never taken any particular interest in politics, wondered what had happened to England. The general indifference to all questions of national importance provided a striking contrast with the state of the public mind when he

had left for the East soon after the war. Then the idea of the Empire was uppermost in everyone's thoughts, the men who had fought and died for it were honoured, the cause for which they had sacrificed themselves had seemed to be the noblest of all causes—now the Great War was habitually referred to as a sort of tragic blunder, in which a regrettably large number of enthusiasts had thrown their lives away. But in general people did not bother about these questions at all—"sport," the theatre, cricket matches, society scandals, these were the things that really mattered, and anyone who took politics seriously was regarded as a bore.

In normal times Kavanagh could readily have slipped into the same pleasant and easy-going manner of life. He had, however, seen too much of anti-British agitation in India not to feel disturbed. So when one day his late Colonel said to him: "Why don't you go into Parliament? You're the sort of fellow we want to counteract all the slush that's talked there," Kavanagh felt it his duty to reply: "Well, sir, if you think I ought to try and stand—But politics are a dirty game."

"So they are. But if decent men won't go in for them they'll never get any cleaner. It's up to you to do what you can to save the Empire—it mayn't be much, but every ounce of weight in the right scale counts for something."

Accordingly, resisting his natural inclination to settle down to farming and shooting in Mershire, Kavanagh let the place for several years and wrote a letter to the Chief Agent of the Conservative Party saying he wished to stand for Parliament. The Chief Agent replied promptly, fixing a date for an interview.

At the hour appointed Kavanagh, after waiting twenty minutes on a hard leather seat, was shown into a pleasant room looking out over the Houses of Parliament, and found himself in the presence of a stout man with a complacent, rubicund face, seated at a large desk on which reposed an inkstand, a paper-weight weighing down nothing, and a telephone.

George Bloxham, the newly appointed Chief Agent, had recently been deputed to reorganise the Party machine on business lines. Selected as a brilliant organiser who had won his laurels in the wholesale bacon trade, he was generally regarded as just the man to restore Conservatism to its former vigour.

"Good morning," he said in business-like tones. "Major Kavanagh, eh?" he added, glancing at the card handed him by his secretary.

"Yes. I want to stand for Parliament." And to himself Kavanagh added: "But I don't want to stand here. Why doesn't the fellow offer me a chair?"

"H'm. Well, you see, we have a lot of applicants—a terrible lot of applicants. How much could you contribute to your election expenses?"

"How much? Well, really I hadn't thought. I suppose the whole if necessary. I'm not hampered by any want of money."

Kavanagh was invited to sit down. The Chief Agent now smiled genially.

"Come, that's talking. Have a cigar?" And he took a large gold case from his pocket, emitting a sigh of relief the while.

"Thanks, I'll have a cigarette," said Kavanagh, taking out his own case.

"You see, it's like this, Major. We've got to make this place a paying proposition. When I took over,

the Party was hard up. Devilish hard up. People weren't contributing as they used to. If only we could raise about half a million for the next election now——"

"But surely it isn't only money, it's work that counts."

"Bless you, no, it's advertisement. Advertise well, and you'll have the public with you. I'd like you to see some of our new circulars, they're A1. Just the sort of stuff that goes down. But now about your standing. D'you want a country constituency?"

"I should like to stand for my own county, South Mershire, if possible."

"I dare say that can be arranged. The present member's getting on for eighty, and not likely to stand again. We'll see what we can do about it. And you really must see some of our publications. We've got a first-rate man who used to write for the I.L.P. under the name of 'Quizzer.'"

"Then he's turned Conservative?"

"Oh, Lord, no, he's got no politics. But he knows what'll catch the public."

And lifting the receiver of the telephone, he said into it:

"Bring up some samples of our literature."

In a few minutes a young man with an East European profile returned with a bulky packet of literature.

"Now, have a look at these, Major," said Mr. Bloxham, proudly spreading them out on the table. "Snappy, aren't they? Just the thing to catch the eye. 'Vote Conservative and save your bacon!'" —it was evident that the Chief Agent's mind still harked back lovingly to his last sphere of usefulness—"short and to the point! That's the kind of stuff to give

'em ! Now these for the women, striking the homey note. First rate, aren't they ? "

Kavanagh turned them over silently. There was a pretty picture of an aged couple sitting over the fire, and underneath in large lettering : " Vote Conservative and grow old gracefully ! " There was the Prime Minister holding out a well-filled feeding bottle towards a crowing infant. There was a steaming teapot with the words : " The Conservatives took a half-penny off the packet."

" One would think," Kavanagh said to himself, " that Conservatism was a sort of patent food— ' Sweet as cream, children like it ! ' ' Conservatism builds bonnie babies ! ' " Aloud he said, rising :

" Well, good morning, Mr. Bloxham. You'll let me know about South Mershire, won't you ? "

And he shook the podgy hand held out to him. As the swing doors closed behind him Kavanagh realised that he felt absurdly damped by his reception. Only half an hour ago he had pushed his way through those portals, glowing with enthusiasm, eager to renounce the life of ease and pleasure that might have been his for the sake of what he held to be a great and worthy cause—and now ? Was this really all that happened when one offered one's services to the Party ? Of course, he did not really want thanks ; still, he was making no small sacrifice in time and money, surely some word of encouragement might have been forthcoming ? Then he shook himself impatiently, and reflected that this was childish. Were the Party officials to fall on his neck and embrace him ? After all, they *were* only officials ; it was the cause that mattered.

And this was how Kavanagh came to start on the

slippery path of a political career, and to be present at Lady Frensham's dinner-party as the candidate for South Mershire. So far nothing had happened to inspire him with greater enthusiasm for the Party. Once inside it he had supposed that he would be brought in touch with people interested in large political questions, and he dined out hopefully at the houses of leading Conservatives—to which, as a rich and unattached young man, he received endless invitations—always expecting that at any rate over the port he would learn something more about the Party with which he had thrown in his lot. But no, the conversation turned almost invariably on sport—shooting, hunting—the newest make of motor-car, or where to go for a pleasant holiday abroad.

Despairing of the Party, Kavanagh turned to the independent patriotic societies, whose circulars poured in on him always accompanied by requests for funds. There was the "League of National Constitutionalists," and the "Union of Constitutional Nationalists," with almost identical programmes, but bitterly hostile to each other; there was the "British Dreadnoughts League"—the inaugural meeting of which he had attended years before when home on leave; then there was the "League of Loyal Citizens," the "King and Country Union," the "Home Front League," etc., etc. Kavanagh's head whirled as he tried to disentangle them. All were apparently aiming at the same thing, all owned comfortable offices with a secretary sitting at an enormous desk, and typewriters clicking in the background. Kavanagh conscientiously went the round of them, and left with bundles of leaflets stuffed into his pockets—together with subscription forms ready to fill in. Funds, more

funds—this was the burden of each secretary's song—"if only we could raise £30,000 a year!" The secretary of the "British Dreadnoughts League" indeed declared that nothing under a million a year would meet the case. Precisely what was to be done with these vast sums when collected no one seemed to have time to think out—apparently mass conversions were only a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence.

And so it happened that Cragg, the Labour back bencher, was the first Member of Parliament who had spoken seriously to Kavanagh about matters affecting the fate of the nation.

Coming out of the House of Commons after the Frenshams' dinner-party, Kavanagh looked up at the stars and said:

"The night is yet young; I'll take a breather!"

He was still fresh enough to London to enjoy walking through the streets at night, and cutting across Parliament Square, he turned into Whitehall. As he passed the Cenotaph he raised his hat at the same moment as a man coming towards him, a man with set white features which struck him as curiously familiar.

"Hullo, Terence!"

"Jimmy!" Jimmy Brandon! Was it possible?

"I say, old fellow, this is extraordinary!" he said, grasping Brandon's outstretched hand. "I've been talking about you only to-night with Rosamund Dare. You remember her in the old days in the Square garden? Isn't it odd the way one mentions somebody one's lost sight of and then suddenly runs into them?"

"Yes, 'speak of the devil and you see his horns'—as our Italian friends say."

"Anyhow, it's good to see you again," said Kavanagh, turning to walk by Brandon's side in the direction of Victoria Street.

It must be sixteen years, he said to himself, since they had met—in the spring of 1918 when both, though only boys of nineteen, were war-time captains. Then he had heard how Jimmy had been fearfully wounded at Asiago, but had made a miraculous recovery; after a while a pencil note in Jimmy's handwriting had reached him. During all the years that followed they had corresponded spasmodically, but somehow had never succeeded in meeting: when Kavanagh was home on leave Brandon happened to be somewhere in the East of Europe, or when Brandon was in London Kavanagh was in India. And since Kavanagh had left the service he had been too much occupied with taking over his estate and embarking at the same time on a political career to follow up personal friendships and find out Brandon's whereabouts. But here was Jimmy in the flesh walking beside him.

"By Jove, old chap," he repeated, "it's a bit of luck meeting like this."

"Yes, it's grand," Brandon answered solemnly, and his face formed into a sort of crease that puzzled Kavanagh.

"I say, you might look more pleased to see a fellow; smile, Jimmy, smile!"

"I never smile," said Brandon. "You remember the poem we learnt at school 'He never smiled again'—Henry II, wasn't it? Well, that's me, Terence."

"What on earth do you mean? D'you never laugh either?"

At Kavanagh's obvious bewilderment Brandon emitted a wild hoot that made several passers-by turn round in surprise.

Had poor Jimmy gone mad? Perhaps the wound had affected his brain. Kavanagh relapsed into an embarrassed silence.

"No, Terence, I'm not mad," said Brandon, answering his friend's thoughts. "Come to my house, it's close by, and we can have a talk in peace."

They walked on together until they reached a house in Smith Square. "Here's where I live," said Brandon. And opening the door, he led the way into the smoking-room on the ground floor.

"You've made yourself jolly snug, Jimmy," said Kavanagh, sinking into the low saddle-bag beside the fireplace and looking round at the old furniture, Persian rugs, and paintings on the walls around him. "I like your pictures. Who're they by?"

Brandon struck an absurd attitude and bowed.

"Your humble servant to command," he said.

"What, Jimmy! Are they really your efforts? I didn't know you were such an artist. You used to paint in the old days, I remember, but these are first class."

"Oh, I'm a portrait painter now by profession—didn't you know that? I've got on quite well—well enough to pick and choose my models a bit. I loathe painting anybody with no points of interest. I see you're looking at my picture of Mrs. Murray Bateman—that's one of the best things I've done."

"Yes, it's extraordinary life-like. But what points does Mrs. Bateman present? She's not a beauty—beneath the paint and powder."

"You're right, she's no *houri*. But I said points of

interest, not beauty. I found Mrs. Bateman extraordinarily interesting to paint."

And again Brandon's face creased in the odd way that had struck Kavanagh on their meeting.

"Mrs. Murray Bateman certainly helped to cheer things up at the Frenshams' dinner-party at the House to-night. These Conservatives are heavy going, Jimmy."

"I should think so. But what were you doing in that *galère*. Politics usen't to be much in your line."

"No. But all the same, I'm going to stand for Parliament."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, seriously I am."

And Kavanagh launched forth into an account of his recent activities in political circles. It was a relief to talk to Jimmy, to tell him of his hopes and fears, his longing to be of service to the country and the despair that often seized him on meeting with blank indifference from the very people to whom he had looked for support.

"It's hard work trying to wake the British public up to the Bolshevik danger. I've tried speaking at a few London meetings, but it's always a case of preaching to the converted. And one ends by stirring up the wrong people—the ones who've absolutely got Bolshevism on the brain. There seems to be no middle course between apathy and hysteria. You can't think what a lot of lunatics there are about who imagine the wildest things. If they'd only do some real work one wouldn't mind; instead of that they pester one with letters that lead to nothing. Look at these!" and Kavanagh drew out of his pocket a bundle of envelopes hastily torn open. "That's a

pretty average sample of my post—reached me to-night just as I was starting out and I looked into them on my way to the House. Here's a retired R.E. Colonel in the North who tells me he's been so alarmed by the Bolshevik menace that he's leaving with his whole family for an island in the South Pacific. Then an old lady in Bath writes to assure me there's nothing to worry about, as we're the lost ten tribes, so we're bound to come out on top in the end. And someone else sends a post card to say the Roman Catholics are at the bottom of all the trouble and the Pope is having poison put into her tea."

Kavanagh stuffed the bundle back into his pocket and went on cheerfully :

" Well, I've talked enough about my affairs. What about you, Jimmy ? There's lots I want to know."

" Amongst other things, what's happened to my smile, eh ? Perhaps I'd better tell you all about it. Have a drink ? Sherry ? Whisky ?—or better still, old brandy, there's some first-rate 'seventy-eight here ? You'll want it before I'm through. It's not a pretty story."

And Brandon crossed over to a cupboard from which he took a couple of glasses and a dusty bottle.

" Thanks," said Kavanagh, as Brandon filled a glass and put it beside him. " Now, fire away."

" You remember I was wounded at Asiago in the Piave show in June nineteen-eighteen."

" Yes, in the head, weren't you ? "

" Not exactly. Whole face. A shell burst close by me. Would you like to see what I looked like after it ? Take a good pull at that brandy and I'll show you."

Going to the writing table Brandon opened a drawer and took a photograph out of an envelope.

"Sure you feel strong enough, old man?"

Kavanagh nodded.

"Look at that, then."

And Brandon held the photograph towards him.

There was a moment of silence. Then Kavanagh covered his eyes with his hand and put the photograph face downwards on the table at his side.

"Good Lord! Jimmy," he murmured. "Good Lord!"

It was the most ghastly thing he had ever seen—what had once been the window of a human soul reduced to the semblance of a gutted house—one eye blown from its socket, a gaping hole beneath, lips, nose torn asunder, teeth gone, a limply hanging jaw beneath that chasm—it was terrible. Even as he thought of it he shuddered.

But a laugh, that same strange hooting laugh that Brandon had given vent to in the street, roused him:

"I don't look pretty, do I? Not the sort of portrait to give one's best girl, eh? But buck up, old chap, you see there's nothing much wrong with me now, is there?"

"No," said Kavanagh, coming back with relief to the present, "you've changed a bit, of course, but still, it's you all the same. How on earth did they put you together again?"

"Well, I was taken prisoner—shoved into an Austrian hospital, and finally sent to Vienna. There are marvellous surgeons there, you know, and plastic surgery's been reduced to a fine art. They understand face building as none of our fellows do—face lifting too, by the way. There are hardly any old-looking women in Vienna, they all have their faces lifted and

look young at sixty—it's amazing. I don't know if they'd have taken so much trouble about mine if it hadn't been for a bit of luck. There happened to be an Austrian orderly in the hospital I'd done a good turn to in the war, and like a decent chap he spoke up about it, so that a great swell in that line, fellow called Zinzenberg, took a special interest in me. Bit by bit he built my face up with those marvellous fingers of his until at last he'd made me something like myself again. Months went by, and when the war was over I stayed on to remain in Zinzenberg's hands as long as possible. When at last I saw myself in the glass almost exactly as I'd been before, it seemed unbelievable."

Brandon paused, lit a fresh cigarette, and went on again.

"But there was one thing even Zinzenberg couldn't do. He couldn't make me smile. You understand, the muscles had been too much damaged ever again to do the lifting job that makes one's face work. My lips will stretch outwards, but they can't curve upwards—see?" And Brandon executed the odd crease that had puzzled Kavanagh. "So you must take that for a smile, old fellow—it's meant as such."

"I understand." Kavanagh was silent for a moment and then said: "You never told me a word about all this in your letters."

"Oh, there was nothing to make a song about. I wanted to forget about it as soon as possible. I only told you to-night because you wondered why I looked so wooden when we met."

"I'm awfully sorry, old chap. I didn't understand. It was stupid of me."

"Not a bit. Quite natural. And I don't mind

talking to you about it. Besides, as you see, it all came right in the end."

"Yes. Only you had to leave the Army?"

"I didn't have to." Brandon paused a moment and then went on: "I found a life that suited me better."

"Painting?"

Brandon hesitated for a fraction of a second before answering:

"Oh, painting and roaming about—all over the Continent, the Near East, Egypt, and so on. In all sorts of queer out-of-the-way places."

And then Brandon went on to talk of his travels, painting word-pictures of the races he had studied and the curious people he had met, with a vividness of touch that enthralled his friend.

Big Ben was striking two o'clock when Kavanagh made his way out of the house.

CHAPTER III

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF JAMES BRANDON

KAVANAGH returned cheered to his rooms in Half Moon Street. It was splendid running into Jimmy like this, although he had changed since the old days. Perhaps that was hardly to be wondered at considering all he had gone through. And then the years he had spent wandering about the Continent and speaking foreign languages no doubt accounted for his rather curious diction, not exactly pedantic, but different from the clipped words and slangy phrases to which Kavanagh was accustomed in the regiment. Talked rather like a book, did Jimmy. Funny, too, his setting up as a portrait painter! But he was always a bit of a dreamer—had more of the artistic temperament than most soldiers. And he had been a soldier for such a short time. Kavanagh determined not to lose sight of him again, and a few days later dropped in on him before dinner.

"Well, and how are you getting on with the Party?" Brandon asked as they settled down for a talk.

"I don't know that I *am* getting on. There seems to be some sort of queer opposition that one comes up against at every turn—almost as if they didn't want one to be too keen."

"H'm. You feel that, do you?"

"Yes, definitely. But I don't know why I should bother you with it. You don't go in for politics, do you?"

"No. But I'm interested in what you're saying. Go on, Terence."

"Well, if I'm not boring you, there are a lot of things that are puzzling me."

"For example?"

"First of all then," and Terence began ticking off his points on his fingers, "the sort of way fellows seem to lose all their guts when they get into Parliament. I've known some of them before, keen as mustard, full of fight and of what they'd do when they got in, and now they're there they'd hardly fight a mouse, let alone a Bolshevik. But then"—passing on to his next finger—"there's this odd want of resistance to Bolshevism everywhere. When one's seen what I have out in India—agitators of the Red Flag Union financed by the Soviet Government, Bolshevik propaganda going on in the bazaars—it's inconceivable we should do nothing to stop it there, and next to nothing here. The Conservative Party doesn't seem to worry and the independent societies say they can't raise the funds. Why? If Bolshevism is really a war against Capitalism, why doesn't Capitalism defend itself? Why doesn't it organise its forces? If it had been discovered that a gang of burglars had planned to carry out a series of raids on City offices, wouldn't the City see to it jolly quickly that its safes were protected? Wouldn't it at least take out insurance policies? Yet here, where it's a case of not merely burgling safes, but of collaring the whole wealth of the country, the City sits tight and does nothing."

"No, even though it's seen the coup brought off in another country. The Russian crown jewels sold under its nose!"

"Just so. The City doesn't even bother to put up

funds as an insurance. All the money's on the other side. That's the third thing that's been puzzling me. Where on earth does it come from? Soviet Russia says it can't pay its debts and has to be allowed credits. Yet its propaganda can be carried out at vast expense all over the world. It can finance newspapers—dailies, weeklies, monthlies—organise meetings, cinemas, shows of all kinds, run societies, and so on in every country. The cost of it must be something gigantic. And we're told all this money comes from Russia. How is it possible?"

"No, as the French say, '*cela ne tient pas debout.*'"

"And it certainly can't come out of the workers' pockets. So where *does* it come from? I've asked that question often and nobody can answer it. They don't seem to want to answer it."

"Ah, you've noticed that?" Brandon said, looking, as Kavanagh thought, rather queer.

After that evening the two friends met continually, and somehow Kavanagh began to gain the impression that keen as he was to see Brandon, Brandon was even keener to see him—not only out of friendship. There seemed to be something else; it was almost as if Brandon were watching him, sizing him up in some way. What for?

Kavanagh decided at last to ask him frankly.

"Look here, Jimmy," he said one evening, "I've got a feeling that whilst we're talking about all sorts of things you've got some idea at the back of your mind—something that you're keeping to yourself. It's almost as if you're watching me!" he added with a laugh.

But Brandon made no disclaimer. Instead, to Kavanagh's surprise, he answered quietly:

"Well, as a matter of fact, you're right. I *have* been watching you."

"By Jove, Jimmy, this is a bit thick, considering how long we've known each other," Kavanagh said with some annoyance in his voice.

"Yes; but we haven't met for ages. Men change in fifteen years, Terence. And, after all, we were only boys in the old days when we were pals."

And seeing the cloud still on Kavanagh's face he went on:

"Look here, you mustn't mind, old chap. The fact is, the whole thing's so terribly important. One mustn't risk the slightest mistake. And I wanted to be dead sure of you before saying anything."

"This is very mysterious. But I think you can trust me not to talk, whatever it is."

"Yes, I believe I can. You see, I've watched you to some purpose, Terence. And from little tests I've put you to without your noticing it—don't be huffy now!—I see that you can be close if necessary."

"Close as a clam. Of course I won't breathe a word of anything you tell me."

"Right. Then I can go ahead. From all you've told me since that evening we first met about your political experiences, I've seen that you were up against it. And that, apart from our old friendship, made me want to see more of you. I felt we could help each other. So I determined to watch you, to find out whether I could let you into the secret of my life—my double life as one might call it. For painting is only camouflage for my real work."

"Go on, Jimmy, this is interesting."

"Well. I'll begin at the beginning. You remember how I used to love detective stories?"

"Yes; you were always deep in some great murder mystery."

"Well, but there are more exciting things than mere vulgar murders, based on lust or greed or revenge. There are great mysteries that need the brain of the criminologist to solve, far more thrilling than anything Edgar Wallace ever devised. These are the problems it's worth while tackling—and devoting one's whole life to unravelling."

"You mean——?"

"The hidden causes of the world's events."

"Good Lord!" Kavanagh was decidedly startled.

Brandon went on:

"During the war I always longed to do secret service work, and when my Colonel—'old Bronx,' you know—was put on to it he'd have liked to take me into the show. But for one thing I was too young—only twenty at Asiago when I was wounded, and for another thing Bronx came to the conclusion he couldn't make much use of me. You see, any really observant person could always pick me out of a crowd before I was wounded. My eyes were of two different colours—one brown, one grey." Brandon stopped, and comprehension slowly dawned on Kavanagh.

"You mean, if you called yourself Brandon one day and Snooks the next you'd never have a chance of getting away with it?"

"Something of that sort. Anyway, the war changed that."

"How?"

"By blowing out one of my eyes—the grey one—as you saw in the photograph."

"You don't mean to say that one of your eyes is sham?" asked Kavanagh, looking at his friend in

amazement. "They both look absolutely real."

Brandon nodded. "Marvellous, isn't it? But the left, the grey one, is glass all the same!" And he tapped it lightly with a paper-knife, which emitted a most convincing clink. "Naturally they might build my face up again, but they couldn't put my own eye back. So I had an idea! I was careful, you see, to have it replaced in Vienna by a grey one exactly like it so, as no one at home knows I have lost my eye, I appear to be still, as I was before, a fellow with different-coloured eyes. But after I came back to England I went to an obscure optician in Bath and ordered a spare eye to be made, brown this time, to match the one I have left. In this way, at any moment I can put in the brown eye and apparently have both eyes the same colour. You've no idea how it changes one, especially if someone is on the look out for a man with eyes that don't match."

"By Jove, Jimmy; what an ingenious idea!"

"Yes, but that was not all the bursting shell did for me. As I was having, so to speak, a new face made, I didn't see why I shouldn't have it fitted with a few gadgets so as to be able to change it at will. My teeth were smashed up too and had to be replaced by a false set, together with pads to fill my face out where it had been battered in. This, as you see, was done so cleverly as to make me almost like my old self. But by means of different sets of teeth, with more or less padding, I can alter my appearance entirely—it's extraordinary the difference that teeth can make! So, you see," he ended with a laugh, "it's an ill wind that blows no one any good and even a German shell may bring one luck."

"But, after all, you didn't go into the Secret Service?"

"No," said Brandon slowly, "I didn't go into the Secret Service. I hit on something that interested me far more. It struck me that what we call the Secret Service must be very limited in its scope. And I've found out since that I was right. I don't say that its work is not of enormous interest or that its methods of obtaining information are not marvellous. I'm sure they are. But the information it desires relates entirely to current events. It is merely of the kind to interest the Departments concerned. The War Office wants to know what kind of guns are being manufactured in Paraguay or Poland, or what military preparations are being made in Soviet Russia simply with a view to future hostilities and the efficiency of our own military machine. The Home Office enquires about a certain person merely to judge whether he is fit to be let into the country. It is not the business of the Secret Service to enquire into the motives or hidden causes of the world's events. It is not concerned with speculation ; only with concrete facts. It has never attempted to build up a consecutive theory by studying the origin of world movements, for the past doesn't exist for it ; it wants to know what is happening *now* at the actual moment and what is consequently likely to happen in the next few weeks. And yet the past is the key not only to the present but the future ! What can we know of what is happening in the world to-day unless we enquire into causes that have their roots not only in the past but in the remote past ?

"This is what I've set myself to study. I wanted to find out *why* things happen, to understand the causes of events that seem to us incomprehensible, to discover the secret springs that move men to action or the forces that bind them in inaction. I wanted to under-

stand the reason for the crises that periodically arise in the world—political, economic, or social—that seem to occur without any specific cause. I wanted above all to know who are the real rulers of the world pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

“ You wonder what set me on this track ? Well, it was partly a fellow I met in Vienna, a man who had once been a Communist and mixed with all the ‘ Reds ’ in London and New York. He told me he went into it more out of a spirit of enquiry than from any settled convictions. He simply wanted to find out if there was anything in it, and came at last to the conclusion that *Communism was not the real thing*, that, in a word, there was something behind it all he could never discover. That was what set me thinking, and I determined to find out all I could about the origins of the movement that was convulsing the whole civilised world. So I began to read. During the years that followed on the war I travelled from city to city, reading in all the great libraries of Europe—in Paris, in Berlin, in Rome, in Prague—and at the same time talking to everyone I met in restaurants, cafés, or railway trains. It’s amazing how much information one can pick up in that way.”

“ Good heavens, old man, do you talk all these languages ? ” interposed Kavanagh.

“ Oh, well, I was brought up in Germany, you see, so I could pass as a German quite easily. French I knew of course—had a French governess as a kid. But it meant mugging up a few others. Russian, Polish, Spanish, and so on. No brains required for that—thousands of waiters do it. After a while I took up painting again, which made an excellent excuse for moving from one place to another—sitting about at

street corners or in village squares and getting into talk with passers-by. No one suspects an artist of any ulterior purpose.

"I was lucky, too, in having a perfectly priceless servant called Rigby—the fellow who opens the door when you come here. He has an extraordinary flair for sleuth work, and, as he's half French and was a prisoner in Germany, he's a pretty good linguist. Picked up some Italian, too, when I was painting in Venice.

"Well, Rigby and I had all sorts of adventures together, and when I came back at last to England I'd got the hang of the whole thing in my mind. Then I came into touch with some of the Secret Service people—excellent fellows, most of them, but bound by routine. At the same time, they had sources of information inaccessible to me—Good Lord! what revelations they could make if only they'd go through some of their old files and the records in Government offices for the last fifty or hundred years! But it's nobody's business to do that, as I said—it's only the last fortnight that counts. I shouldn't be surprised if some of the most important documents had gone long ago into the departmental waste-paper basket! They've no idea of the value of a lot of their stuff. During the past five years whilst we've worked in co-operation—for I keep in touch—I've seen reports that meant nothing to them, but which from my point of view were absolutely priceless."

"In that case," said Kavanagh, "it's pretty dreadful to think of all this information not being utilised."

"Publicity's of course the last thing they want. Their information is only for their Departments, not for the benefit of the world. The Press can mislead the

country to any extent and the Secret Service lies low and says nothing. It's not their business to enlighten public opinion. That's where the further difference between their work and mine comes in."

"Then what use do you mean to make of it in the end, Jimmy?"

"I mean to go on working until I've been able to build up a whole consecutive theory which will explain a great deal that's happening in the world to-day. And when I've done that and the last bit of evidence has been collected, I mean to give it the widest publicity. Till that moment comes I've got to lie low and maintain the strictest secrecy."

"I understand. But you've taken on a gigantic task. Is it really possible? When do you expect to get done—if ever?"

"Who can say? There are links still missing, links that may take years to find. The great problem that occupies me night and day is the identity of the individuals behind the movement. Do you remember what Rathenau said: 'Three hundred men, all acquainted with each other, control the economic destiny of the Continent'? But what about twelve men who control the destiny, not only economic, of the whole world?"

"You think there are twelve?"

"I'm nearly sure of it. But more of that another time—it's a long story. Still, perhaps what I've told you to-night may help you to understand what you're up against. You realise already that things aren't what they seem, that entering political life isn't plain sailing, and that, as you said, the strongest opposition you meet with comes from your own side. You've found out, too, that Bolshevism isn't a war of the Have-nots against the Haves, a plot to do away with

all Capitalism—otherwise the whole Capitalist world would have organised a united front against it and nipped it in the bud at the beginning.”

“ Yes, that’s exactly the conclusion I’d come to.”

“ Which of course makes you very dangerous to the other side. People like General Brigham and the cartoonists in the popular Press who represent the Bolshevik regime as being run by a lot of hairy *moujiks* are doing it no harm. On the contrary, they’re helping it by keeping up the fiction that, however misguided, it’s a genuine working-class movement. But once you say, or even find out, anything about what’s really at the back of it all, you can do it enormous damage. That’s why you find yourself up against it. And that’s why I determined to let you into my secret.”

Kavanagh sat still and thought hard. After a few moments he turned to Brandon, who was obviously moved by the intensity of his own feelings towards his self-imposed task and was staring moodily out of the window.

“ I’m very glad you’ve told me this, Jimmy,” he said. “ I believe we could help each other. All you’ve described explains a great deal I couldn’t understand before.”

And to himself Kavanagh added: “ It explains Jimmy, too. Now I see why he talks in the way he does—if he’s been reading for years in the libraries of Europe, no wonder he talks rather like a book.” Aloud he said :

“ I suppose you must have a tremendous collection of data somewhere ? ”

“ Of course. Like to see it ? Come upstairs then.”

Brandon led the way up to a door on the second

floor of the house and opened it with a Yale key. Inside was a room completely lined with steel shelves and cupboards; the former filled with books and pamphlets in a number of different languages; the latter, resembling large safes, provided with special locks. Opening one of these, Brandon disclosed a pile of documents, neatly arranged and labelled.

"The collection of fourteen years," he said, pointing to the row of these steel cupboards. "Notes, reports, photographs, dossiers of people everywhere—all co-ordinated by this"—and he indicated a vast card index also contained in locked steel drawers.

"No one except Rigby is allowed into this room," he explained. "This is where I sit quietly and do my real work."

"Like a human spider in his web!" laughed Kavanagh. "Spinning a network that reaches all over the world."

"Yes, but unfortunately frail, like a real spider's web—made only of theories. What can it do against the golden web spun by the monstrous human spiders that govern the world?"

CHAPTER IV

AN EVENTFUL WEEK-END

AFTER this Kavanagh's life began to take on more colour. Up till the night of the dinner-party at the House of Commons it had seemed to him strangely drab for all its outward gaiety. The people he had met in Society were no more than shadows, or rather animated puppets all repeating the same catch phrases and machine-made opinions turned out for them by politicians or the Press. But now when his brain was in need of exercise he had only to turn into the house in Smith Square and launch into long discussions with Jimmy Brandon on the most enthralling world-problems. In other moods he looked up Rosamund and took her to the play, the opera, or up the river. And though she still mystified him, he felt he was gradually getting nearer to her, breaking down the wall that seemed to stand between them.

One afternoon he came back to his rooms to find Tom Cragg, M.P., on his doorstep.

"You told me to look you up, Major," he said, "so here I am."

"Yes, come in and have a drink and smoke. I'm glad to see you," said Kavanagh, leading the way in. "How do you think things are going in the House?" he went on as they sat down and lit up.

But Cragg was not communicative. Never a man of many words, he seemed to-day to have become unaccountably silent. Kavanagh began to wonder

why he had come at all if he could do nothing but pull at his pipe and say "That's right" to everything. Could it be that he was diffident of opening out to his one-time superior officer? Kavanagh did his best to put him at his ease, talking of the political situation and the need for men with courage to face the dangers threatening the country.

"That's right," Cragg said again, taking his pipe out of his mouth to speak and instantly putting it back again as soon as he had emitted his habitual rejoinder.

"Well now, Cragg, tell me what you really think about things," Kavanagh said at last almost in desperation, determined to say something that could not be met by this inevitable reply.

But this time Cragg was perfectly silent, keeping his pipe in his mouth and looking straight in front of him out of the window. Then suddenly he removed the pipe, tapped it out, put it back in his pocket, and leant forward.

"Look here, Major," he said. "If I say something, you won't let it get back to the Party?"

"To the Labour Party? Of course not."

"Well then, it's like this. I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Kavanagh asked in surprise. "You usen't to be afraid of anything."

"Oh, not for myself, Major; for the old country. When I went into Parliament I thought I could do my bit to help it. But I find I can't. There's something——" he paused.

"You're up against it too? Like many of us," Kavanagh added.

"That's just it. Up against it. And I don't know what it is. There's something behind it all I can't make out."

"Behind the Labour Party?"

"Aye. That's it. Something pushing it—from behind. Several of us feel that, but we daren't say anything."

"I think we're all in the same boat, Cragg. There's something behind all Parties. It's odd you should feel it too."

"Well, that's what I wanted to say to you," Cragg said, getting up and holding out a horny hand. "Now I'll be going. Glad to have had this talk with you, Major."

And with a nod he went his way.

"It's interesting he should have said that," Brandon remarked when Kavanagh told him of the conversation. "I've always felt that if one could convince any politicians of what's going on in the background, it would be some of the Labour Party back benchers. They're nearer to realities than the Conservatives or Liberals. Get Cragg to come here one day and bring some of his pals who think as he does. I'd like to have a talk with them."

Kavanagh had no difficulty in arranging this. Five Labour Party back benchers, including three miners, led by Cragg, assembled one evening in Brandon's studio. But the meeting led to nothing definite. There were the same silences whilst the men smoked and drank copious draughts of beer and answered "That's right" to nearly everything. Even Brandon's skilful questioning could elicit little more than Cragg had said on his first visit to Kavanagh—that they were disappointed, had hoped to be able to do something for the country, to help their mates, and so on, but were always side-tracked on to something different—foreign questions and so on. There seemed to be

something behind it all ; they all felt that, but couldn't say what it was.

"We're not out to help the Russians or the Germans," said one, "we're out to help British workers."

"And all this talk of the German fellow Marx," said another. "Dead long ago, isn't he?" he added, turning to Brandon.

"Yes. Karl Marx died somewhere about 1883."

"Then what's he to us?" answered the first man. "Let's get on with our own job, that's what I says."

This remark met with a chorus of agreement. Then another silence fell on them.

"That's the worst of the British working man," Brandon said after they had gone, "as sound and honest as you like, but quite ignorant of politics and completely inarticulate. The sounder they are, the less they'll talk. It's only the wrong 'uns who've got the gift of the gab."

"I don't believe they've got anything more to say," said Kavanagh. "These fellows just feel in their bones there's some queer power behind them, but can't understand what it is."

"And haven't the initiative to find out or to do anything if they did find out. I'm afraid we shan't make anything out of them, Terence."

"No. It's a pity, for they're in deadly earnest. Take politics more seriously than our people."

"Yes, it's their whole life. No week-ends and golf to take their minds off."

"That reminds me," said Kavanagh, "I've been asked for a week-end by Mrs. Murray Bateman to meet the Prime Minister. Shall I go?"

"By all means. Mrs. Murray Bateman's movements are always worth following."

"And I suppose I oughtn't to miss a chance of meeting Parbury, as I'm going to stand."

But perhaps the fact that Rosamund Dare was to be in the party weighed more than duty in Kavanagh's mind.

Accordingly, Friday afternoon found him at Waterloo, with his luggage, trying to spot a newspaper boy with a late edition which might be expected to give the result of the Middlesbrough by-election. Middlesbrough was a key position for the Conservative Party, and up to the 1929 election had been regarded as an absolutely safe seat, but the mill girls' vote had seriously lowered the Tory majority, and even the Party organisers had shown some concern lest this time it should pass out of their hands altogether.

Ah! There was a newspaper boy.

"Got a late edition?"

"Get it in a minute, sir, there's one just coming in."

The train was moving out as the boy thrust the paper in at the window. Kavanagh glanced hastily at the stop press.

"By Jove, we've lost it!" he said to himself. Yes, there it was in black and white—Labour majority 2,100, and Archbold, one of the best men in the Conservative Party, down and out. It was a tragedy. Kavanagh felt impelled to utter some expletive, but the only other occupant of the carriage was a soldierly looking man of about sixty who was apparently composing himself to sleep. Putting down his paper, Kavanagh sat looking out of the window at the peaceful scenes of country life that flashed past his eyes. Happy, yes, still happy England! Haymakers encamped in circles with hearty teas spread out before them; rosy children rolling in the hay; gardens filled

with gay flowers ; men in white flannels playing cricket on the village green ; motors ; farm-carts ; bicycles thronging along the roads between green hedges—why should there be people anxious to destroy this kind old country ? Of course in the background, and in the big cities, there was the misery of which Tom Cragg had spoken—there were the mounting figures of unemployment—yet what were these but bad patches in a fair garden that must be done away with in course of time ? Kavanagh glowed to think that he himself might have some hand in the creation of a better—a still better—England.

After a while he turned again to look at his travelling companion. Who was he ? Somehow his features seemed vaguely familiar. Where had he seen him before ? Surely on a platform—at some public meeting ? Suddenly it all came back to him. Of course. He was General Brighorn, President of the British Dreadnoughts League, who had spoken at the great Queen's Hall meeting in 1925 that was to inaugurate the new movement to sweep Britain clean of Bolshevism. Kavanagh remembered how the General's entry had stirred all that vast audience so that it rose as one man to hail his advent on the platform and again to roar " He's a jolly good fellow " as he resumed his seat after his address. That was years ago. What had happened to the League now ? Was there anything left of that great movement it promised to become except a dusty office in Victoria Street, a harassed secretary eternally sending out appeals for funds, and an anæmic clerk who handed out pamphlets with a listless air. And there was also General Brighorn slumbering in the corner of a first-class railway carriage.

" Doesn't even bother to look at a paper ! " thought

Kavanagh despairingly. But he was wrong. After a while the General opened his eyes, and taking up a copy of the *Daily Telegraph*, proceeded to turn the pages, folded them backwards, and settled down to read.

"Good. He's sitting up and taking notice. Better still, he's actually taking notes." For the General, after an impatient search in seven pockets, had drawn out a pencil and was making careful marks on the paper he held up before him. Kavanagh looked at him hopefully and caught his eye fixed on him. Should he speak? But the General forestalled him:

"What is a canine ailment that is half a pudding?" he said dreamily. And he pointed to the half-filled-in square of a crossword puzzle.

"So that's what he was doing!" thought Kavanagh. "It would be funny if it were not so tragic. But it *is* funny," he added to himself, for he was not an Irishman for nothing, and he burst into a shout of laughter.

The General looked astonished.

"Excuse me, sir," said Kavanagh, "but your question really rather took me by surprise!"

"My question? I didn't ask you any question!"

"You asked me what was 'a canine ailment that was half a pudding.' I conclude it's a clue in your crossword?"

"Dear, dear. Did I really? I must have been thinking out loud. It's a way I have sometimes. Well, as I *did* ask you, perhaps you can supply the answer?"

"Certainly. I can do that in one. Mange, of course."

"Mange? How do you make that out? Ah, blancmange. Of *course*. Half a pudding. Yes, yes. Very quick on your part. You seem to be a crossword

expert. Do you do much of it ? ”

“ No. I can't say I do, except when a young nephew of mine comes to spend a half-holiday with me. Fact is, I'm standing for South Mershire, so I've a good many other things to think of—my name's Kavanagh, by the way. This is a bad thing about Middlesbrough,” he added.

“ Middlesbrough ? Have we lost Middlesbrough ? ”

“ Yes ; with a drop of five thousand votes. The Labour Party are in with a majority of over two thousand.”

“ Dear me, that's unfortunate. What I always say is, that what we're up against is *apathy*. That's the trouble—*apathy*. One feels it everywhere.”

Kavanagh smiled. “ How are the British Dreadnoughts getting on, General ? You see, I know who you are. I was at that meeting in the Queen's Hall nine years ago and heard you speak. It promised to be a fine movement.”

General Brighorn sighed. “ Ah yes, but the trouble has always been the funds. If we could have raised the money——”

“ I thought you raised a good deal.”

“ No, no. A mere matter of thirty thousand pounds. What can you do with that ? Now, if we could only raise half a million we might do something. Perhaps you could help us in this way, Mr.—er—er.”

“ Major Kavanagh.” And scenting that the General was about to touch him for a cheque which he was not in the least inclined to contribute, he added hastily :

“ Doesn't it rather depend on what one *does* with the money one collects ? ”

“ Perhaps, perhaps,” General Brighorn answered impatiently. He had evidently had enough of the

subject and was longing to get back to his crossword. "Are you going by any chance to stay with the Batemans?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes."

"Ah, then we shall have further opportunities for conversation!" And nodding genially the General took up his paper again and continued filling in the squares. That word "mange" had enabled him to finish all the right-hand corner, and by the time the train drew up at Lingford Station only one more word was needed to make the puzzle complete.

Mrs. Murray Bateman's small house-party turned out to consist of no less than twenty guests, including besides the Prime Minister, the new German Chargé d'Affaires, Lady Caroline Wentlock—a leading Conservative hostess—and several other prominent members of the Party. Most of them had arrived by car and were finishing tea when Kavanagh and General Brighorn were shown into the lounge-hall, where Mrs. Murray Bateman sat ensconced behind a large silver urn.

After greeting his hostess, Kavanagh looked round quickly for Rosamund. Ah! there she was, dressed in a cool summer frock, dropping bits of cake into the mouth of a small wire-haired terrier that, with the saintly expression of his kind, sat gazing up into her face.

"So you see I've obeyed the call of duty to meet the Prime Minister," Kavanagh said, sitting down beside her.

"I hope you'll be rewarded. Mr. Parbury," she went on, dropping her voice discreetly, "is in his most rustic mood. He's been round the home farm already."

Kavanagh looked across the room to where the great

man stood, lighting his pipe, on the hearthrug, surrounded by a respectful circle.

"Ah, Alfred," he was saying to his host, "you're lucky to be able to stay down here as long as you like—no hurrying back to town for you on Monday morning. There's no place like the Sussex Weald, I always say. If only one could settle down here in peace and watch the sheep all day browsing on the hill-sides!"

"Let's go out into the garden," said Kavanagh to Rosamund, who got up languidly. Together they wandered along the smooth grass paths between blazing herbaceous borders.

"The P.M.'s right," Kavanagh said after a pause, "the country is the place at this time of year."

"Do you think so? I'd rather be in London."

"For society? I didn't know you were so fond of it."

"No, not for society. But——" she hesitated, then said hurriedly: "The country leaves one too much time to think. One must have a mind perfectly at rest to enjoy peace and quiet." And seeing a question springing to Kavanagh's lips, she added with a laugh: "Like Mr. Parbury, for example! His mind always lies on a sofa of comfortable thoughts."

"Yes, and hardly ever puts its feet to the ground. I wonder whether he'd really like to watch sheep all day?"

"No. I think even he would be bored by the end of an hour or two. But it's the thing just now for politicians of all Parties to make out that their real interests are either rural or literary or artistic—anything rather than political. They bear 'the burden of office' from a pure sense of duty whilst yearning all the while to flee from public life to some calm retreat where they can pursue their real avocations in peace."

"The old pose of musical comedy stars!" laughed Kavanagh. "They always liked to have themselves photographed for the society papers in sunbonnets, making hay or weeding their garden as a piquant contrast to the artificiality of their stage appearances."

"Well, now the fashion has spread to the political world. Haven't you noticed the Press is always featuring the Home Secretary fondling his favourite pig, or the Leader of the Opposition as a Red Indian at a Labour Party fancy-dress ball?"

"I suppose the idea is to make the public feel these exalted beings are human after all—just men like themselves, lovable creatures at heart!"

"Yes, and that it's really very kind of them to bother about affairs of State when they'd so much rather be doing something pleasanter."

"Still, it would be rather nice for a change to have a Prime Minister who liked being one instead of longing to be a farmer. There must be lots of farmers who'd like to be Prime Minister. It seems rather a waste of opportunity."

The same evening in the smoking-room at cocktail time Kavanagh was introduced to his Chief.

"Glad to welcome you to the Party, Major Kavanagh," Mr. Parbury said, extending his hand genially. "I hope things are going well in South Mershire?"

"Yes, sir. Only there's a good deal of headway to make up. The present member has let things go to sleep a bit, whilst the Socialist candidate is always active. He was a conscientious objector in the war, by the way."

"Ah, well! But be careful to avoid personalities. I understand you're a bit of a Die-hard, Kavanagh."

So let me give you a word of advice. Don't be carried away by your enthusiasm. Cultivate the team spirit. Learn to subordinate your private feelings to Party principles. Loyalty to Party, that comes first with us. And of course, loyalty to your leaders. Be ready to be guided by them, to trust their judgment."

Kavanagh listened respectfully. It was evident that he was to be merely a cog in the Party machine, a patient rotating cog on the wheel turned by the master hand of Nelson Parbury.

"But don't you think, sir," he ventured to say at last, "that Socialism is a danger to be fought?"

"Extreme Socialism, yes. But with the more moderate Socialists we have many ideas in common. We must avoid, above all, antagonising them."

Just what Oscar Franklin had said! Strange how the same phrases seemed to become current coin in political circles. It was essential, however, to avoid antagonising Mr. Parbury, so Kavanagh continued to listen meekly whilst the Prime Minister discoursed in beautiful language on the achievements of the League of Nations, the need for an understanding with Soviet Russia, and the legitimate aspirations of the Indians for self-government.

"We have got to march with the times," he ended impressively. "We can't set the clock back. We have to realise that the day has gone by for us to dictate."

"Then you don't think, sir, that there is any danger of our being dictated to?"

"No, no," Mr. Parbury answered with a touch of impatience; "and if we are, we must take it in good part. We cannot arrogate to ourselves the rôle of absolute autocrats."

It was evident that he was getting tired. The dressing-bell provided a welcome diversion.

The Conservative set-back at Middlesbrough did nothing to damp the spirits of the Batemans' house-party, the news in the evening paper brought by Kavanagh had evoked only a few passing comments—"It was unfortunate of course"; "Still, Archbold was rather a turbulent kind of fellow, very unpopular with the Opposition; and then Turnbull, the Labour man, was a good sort, it would be just as well to have him in the House," etc.

Kavanagh, falling under the spell of this happy, careless atmosphere, began by the next morning to wonder at his own enthusiasm for a political career. Wasn't it really rather foolish, after all? Why should one worry about tariffs or the industrial crisis or the League of Nations when this lazy summer world lay open to one? As to propaganda, the very word seemed ponderous and absurd. What was there to propagand against? Trees, birds, and flowers seemed to answer: "Nothing!"

There was the Prime Minister on Saturday afternoon, with the whole weight of the nation's destinies on his shoulders, playing cricket with the House eleven against the village, and being happily bowled out by the baker's boy. As to General Brighorn, even crossword puzzles appeared to provide too great a mental effort, and the *Daily Telegraph* lay unopened on his knees as he dozed under the cedars after lunch with a handkerchief over his head to keep off the flies.

Mrs. Murray Bateman was an excellent hostess and left her guests to seek amusement or repose as they pleased. But finding Kavanagh alone in a corner of

the lawn she insisted on taking him round the rose-garden and telling him all about the marvellous new system of philosophy she had just discovered of which a certain Countess Zapraksy who had recently arrived in London appeared to be the chief exponent.

"You really *must* come and hear her, she's simply *wonderful*. I'm having her to speak at my house one afternoon. Will you come if I send you a card?"

"Well—philosophy's not much in my line. In what does the Countess's wonderfulness consist?"

"Oh, I don't know, it's difficult to explain, you'll just *feel* it when you meet her. She's such a marvellous personality. She simply radiates the life-force."

"Sounds most invigorating," Kavanagh agreed heartily; "I'd love to come and be galvanised."

A faint flicker of annoyance passed over Mrs. Bateman's countenance. She was not accustomed to have her discoveries treated lightly.

"Ah, you must not come in a mocking spirit," she said, "or you will learn nothing!"

"Indeed, no. I will come in all humility, prepared to sit at the Countess's feet—metaphorically, at least."

And with that Mrs. Bateman had to be content.

At the moment Kavanagh had no intention of accepting her invitation; "cults" and prophets of new gospels held little attraction for him, but to accept seemed the line of least resistance; it was too hot to struggle. Besides, his thoughts were mainly occupied with Rosamund.

Somewhat to his surprise, Kavanagh had felt his heart beating quite uncomfortably when he found her at the tea-table in the hall on his arrival. He wondered what it was that made Rosamund so different from other girls. Of course she was beautiful—the small

head with its burnished waves of red-brown hair, the pale but luminous skin, the red curves of her lips, were all charming enough, but it was the veiled look in the big grey eyes, the languor in her movements and in her low musical voice that particularly fascinated him. He wondered whether it was a case of the attraction of contrasts—he was essentially an outdoor man, whilst there was something exotic about Rosamund—she was like a gardenia—yes, that was it, a beautiful white gardenia set in dark-green leaves. He was glad to have found a simile to suit her.

On Sunday evening a strange thing happened. They were out together in a punt, and Rosamund had insisted on taking the pole whilst Kavanagh lay back amongst the cushions watching her slender figure bending to and fro. Suddenly as they passed under some overhanging trees a branch caught in the neck of her dress and tore it off her shoulder.

"I say, has it hurt you?" Kavanagh exclaimed, leaning forward, for on the soft white flesh a red mark had flashed out.

But Rosamund answered almost angrily: "Oh no, there's nothing the matter—don't bother, Terence."

"Rosamund, there *is* something the matter!" Kavanagh persisted, his eyes fixed on the place, and although Rosamund then hastily covered it up he had time to notice that this was no fresh wound made by the jagged end of a drooping bough, but a dull red scar in the form of a circle with a dot in the centre which seemed to have been branded into the point of her shoulder.

Seeing his bewilderment, Rosamund said with an attempt at unconcern: "That's an old mark; it's been there for ages."

"But what is it? It looks like——"

"Don't ask me about it," she interrupted, and he saw she had turned pale—a hunted look had come into her eyes. "Don't ask me about it," she repeated tremulously. And at the quiver in her voice Kavanagh, cut to the heart and hardly knowing what he was doing, put his arms round her and cried:

"But, darling, don't you understand, I love you! Tell me what it is that makes you look sometimes so sad—tell me everything, Rosamund."

She pushed him gently away. "I can't tell you. And you mustn't love me, Terence. I don't want love."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to feel anything, to have any emotions. I dread emotions."

"Ah, you've cared for someone!"

"Yes, once—long ago. But that's all over now."

"Is he dead?" Kavanagh could not help trying to discover whether he had a living rival.

Rosamund answered with a faint shudder: "No, I wish he was!" Then, reading Kavanagh's thought, she added: "But I've put him out of my thoughts, I've done with all that—for ever!"

Silence fell on them as Rosamund punted slowly to the landing-stage and they made their way back to the house through the darkening garden.

After dinner, as they sat together in a corner of the hall, they talked of Kavanagh's plan of standing for Parliament, and Rosamund, who had become her normal self again, suddenly said:

"Look here, Terence, I've had an idea. I heard you saying at dinner that you wanted a secretary for your political work."

" So I do. D'you know of one ? "

" What kind do you want ? "

" Oh, capable, methodical, not too plain-headed if possible. Still, not a vamp."

" Well, do you think I'd do ? "

" You, Rosamund ? " Kavanagh said in surprise.

" You don't mean it ? "

" Why not ? I want a job."

" Somehow I can't imagine you hammering a typewriter. It seems absurd," demurred Kavanagh.

" Oh, but you don't know how I can work. I was at college, you see. Do take me on, Terence," she added with an earnestness that puzzled him.

" Of course I will. I'd love to have you."

" Good. We'll start work directly we get back to London."

Kavanagh smiled at her eagerness ; but he could not understand it. His mind worked on very simple lines where women were concerned, and he wondered why she should be so keen to be his secretary but not his wife. Well, one must be thankful for small mercies, and perhaps in time—who knew ?

The next morning they travelled up to London by the same train, and on parting at Waterloo Rosamund said gaily :

" Well, then, it's all settled ? "

" Certainly, as far as I'm concerned. And the sooner we begin the better."

But they had reckoned without Lady Dare. Rosamund was her favourite daughter ; Claire, her elder, had married none too well two years earlier, and Lady Dare had counted on Rosamund to make a really brilliant marriage, especially now that there was no question of

her marrying young Peter Markham, to whom she had been engaged seven years ago. The strange illness she had had at that time was, Lady Dare felt convinced, as much to be accounted for by overworking at college as by the sad ending to her engagement ; why then should she want to get to work again instead of enjoying society like other girls of her world ?

But a visit from Kavanagh had the effect of disarming Lady Dare completely. Although as much puzzled as her mother by Rosamund's craving for work, Kavanagh's Celtic imagination came to his rescue, and he found himself eloquently depicting the urge that such a girl as Rosamund must feel to find a scope for her energies—after all, public affairs must now be of interest to every thinking man or woman. His voice with its faint suggestion of a brogue, his charming manners and good looks, had their effect, and by the end of twenty minutes Lady Dare had fallen completely beneath his spell. Terence, as his friends said, " had a way with him " that few people could resist.

It was not, however, a mere matter of fascination. After all, Lady Dare reasoned, here was a man, young, rich, and charming, in every respect a most desirable *parti* ; if Rosamund were to be constantly with him, who knew to what it might lead ? The conclusion was identical with Kavanagh's own. So it was settled. The very next morning the door-bell of his flat rang, and Rosamund appeared in a neat washing frock of crêpe de Chine with a new leather attaché case in her hand—" Quite the efficient secretary ! " as Kavanagh observed with a laugh.

Then she got to work on his papers, arranging them in neat piles, affixing labels, collecting newspaper cuttings from odd corners of his desk.

"Haven't you got a book to paste these in?" she asked, holding up a bundle.

"No. I just jam them into envelopes," he said, pointing to a bursting packet.

"Well, we must buy a book straight away. And you haven't a typewriter, I suppose?"

"Lord, no. We must get one."

It ended by their going off together and spending a glorious morning at a store that specialised in office equipment. And because they really could not wait for their purchases to be delivered by the firm's motor-van, they returned at one o'clock in a taxi bearing triumphantly the latest thing in typewriters, files, clips, labels, and all the paraphernalia of a really perfectly equipped office. When they had deposited all these in the right places around the smoking-room, Kavanagh said with a smile:

"Well, that's done. Now let's go to lunch at the Berkeley!"

But Rosamund shook her head. "No, the secretary doesn't lunch with her employer the first day. That comes later. You don't even know whether I'm satisfactory yet. I may get the sack in a week."

So Kavanagh had to be content with a lonely luncheon at his club.

But he was very happy. As the days went by he marvelled more and more at the transformation in Rosamund. All her languor had vanished, there was no longer the veiled look in her eyes nor the dragging note in her voice that had so intrigued him. At the same time there was something feverish in her energy, as if she were working so as not to think. And some days there were dark lines beneath her eyes that made Kavanagh wonder whether she had lain awake at night.

Sometimes they went together to Brandon's, or Brandon dropped in at Half Moon Street at the end of the day's work.

"Funny," he said to Kavanagh when they were alone together, "how one sees people without taking them in. I've met Rosamund Dare at parties often since the old days in the square, and only thought of her as a pretty girl. Now of course I see there's something more, something much more. That girl's very curious, Terence."

"You think so? I used to feel that too—at first."

"There's been something in her life. I can't think what. Not simply an ordinary love-affair; something more complex."

After a while Brandon went on:

"It's time you settled down, you know, and found a *châtelaine* for that old barn of yours."

"Speak for yourself, Jimmy."

Brandon laughed bitterly. "My dear fellow. What girl would look at me—a man who never smiles and whose face takes to pieces! Besides, my work keeps me always on the move—here to-day and gone to-morrow. Nice sort of husband I should make. It's quite different for you, Terence."

"Well, if Rosamund will have me—" and Kavanagh told Brandon what had happened in the country. Brandon listened sympathetically.

"That girl's all right," he said slowly. "And I believe she can be trusted."

"Can we let her into the secret of your work?"

"Not yet. We must study her a little longer first. But it would be worth while putting out a feeler. I have an idea, a very distinct idea, that she knows something about the line we're on. In that case she might be very useful to us, Terence."

CHAPTER V

THE ZODIAC

AN incident that occurred a few days later gave them the required opportunity. They had all three foregathered in Brandon's studio late one afternoon, when a roll of drums sounded from the street. Brandon crossed to the window and looked out. A Communist procession was approaching, composed of the usual crowd of degenerates, most of them mere boys, wearing the family likeness that characterises the revolutionaries of all ages and all countries, and holding aloft dingy red flags and the banners of the N.U.W.M.

"Poor fools," said Brandon, "cannon fodder for the class war!"

"What do they hope to get out of these demonstrations?" said Kavanagh, looking over Brandon's shoulder.

"To put the wind up people. Their leaders have told them that all London quakes at their approach. And in one way they serve a purpose."

"How?"

"By concentrating the attention of the public on the outward manifestations of Bolshevism instead of on what's behind it."

"Ah!" said Rosamund, with a catch in her voice, "you understand then?"

"Understand what?" asked Brandon.

"That Bolshevism's only the outward manifestation of something far deeper, far more formidable. It's

like the lava that overflows a village, but the earthquake that shakes a whole country is the real evidence of the forces at work underground."

The two men looked at each other in surprise.

"How do you know that, Roasmund?" said Kavanagh. "Of course I realise it, because I'm up against it all the time."

"Ah!" said Rosamund. "I wonder whether you understand what you're really fighting, the terrible power of the forces against which you've pitted your strength? I'm not talking of course about the mere organisation of Bolshevism—though that's marvellous enough—but of the secret powers behind the whole world movement, the master minds directing it!"

"And who are they?" said Brandon enigmatically.

In a voice so low that it could only just be heard, Rosamund murmured:

"The Hidden Chiefs."

Brandon gave a start: "What did you say, Rosamund?"

"The Hidden and Secret Chiefs of the Inner Order," the girl repeated dreamily.

"You know that?" said Brandon, tense with suppressed excitement.

Rosamund made no reply, but moved to the door; then suddenly she turned, and going up to Kavanagh laid her hand on his arm.

"Terence," she said earnestly and her voice trembled slightly. "You're fighting for a great cause. And remember I'm with you in the fight."

The next moment she was gone.

"What can it mean?" said Kavanagh.

"It means that Rosamund has been very near the heart of things. She spoke of the Hidden Chiefs!"

" Yes. But that conveyed nothing to me."

" Ah ! But it's of the first importance. You remember what I said, when we first discussed this question, about the real rulers of the world ? "

" Yes, and you said you thought they were twelve. I've always meant to get you back on to that point."

" Well, I'll try to explain. But I must begin with a rough outline of the way the revolutionary movement's organised. Broadly speaking, it's on two lines—the political and the occult, each divided into a number of different groups. The occult lot, that is to say the rank and file amongst them, usually knows nothing about the political side of the business, and the political lot, the avowed revolutionaries, knows nothing about the occult side. And even the groups on the same side often know little about each other. They're carefully kept apart in water-tight compartments lest they should compare notes and find out what's behind it all.

" To take the occult side first. The rank and file consist mainly of harmless individuals with an innocent love of mystery who imagine they're being initiated into all the secrets of the Universe—usually people who would not be bothered to study deeply on their own and who really imagine that all the wisdom of Greece and Egypt is being instilled in their minds. That there's any connection between their group and the revolutionary movement probably never enters their heads ; they're content to be led by their own particular teachers, and to know that behind these teachers are what they call the Hidden Chiefs, or, in full, the Hidden and Secret Chiefs of the Inner Order."

" Ah, then they know there is this secret council ? " asked Kavanagh.

"Certainly. The existence of these unknown and exalted beings lies at the back of all occult tradition and is a cardinal point in the teaching of every occult group."

"But do you think that they really exist?"

"Not in the sense that their would-be disciples imagine—as depositaries of supernatural wisdom. I don't believe in the pretensions of the seventeenth-century Rosicrucians any more than I believe in the three sages of Agarttha of whom the Polaires speak to-day. But I do think it possible that there have been and still are people who have in some way mastered the art of projecting thought and floating ideas in a way unknown to the rest of the world. And I've also wondered often whether personal magnetism isn't more used in political life than most people have any conception of.

"Now the political side of the movement is run on the same lines as the occult side, that is to say, on the old secret society system. The Communist Party in each country is in reality a secret society—few members know who are the real heads or where the direction comes from. Moreover, in the secret correspondence of leading Communists—not the sort of 'secret documents' that the Press occasionally produces as a marvellous scoop, but the really secret communications that I've got hold of from time to time—the phraseology used is absolutely that of the secret conspirators known as the Illuminati in the Eighteenth Century. There is the same plan of using a calendar of their own, much like the one adopted during the French Revolution, the same system of classical pseudonyms for places and people; there are the same references to a secret council who direct the movement in the back-

ground. Now, twelve is the number one finds in the past controlling occult groups—and twelve is still the number of the Hidden Chiefs. Come upstairs, and I'll show you evidence that it is also the number controlling the revolutionary movement."

Once in the room where he kept his collection, Brandon took a paper out of a file of documents and handed it to Kavanagh.

"Do you notice the signature to this letter, addressed by one leading Communist to another?"

Kavanagh read the following typewritten words:

"The cause is progressing. The brethren in Macedonia have met in conclave and decided to allocate £100,000 for the work in Memphis. Damocles will bring instructions from the Twelve and preparations have been made to hasten the Great Day."

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"Signed M.," Kavanagh said reflectively.

"That's what I thought at first. But it's not an M at all. This is what gave me the clue. See?" And Brandon pushed forward another slip of paper on which was written:

"Damocles has arrived in safety."

♏

"Well, you've got me beat this time," Kavanagh said. "What on earth is that hieroglyphic?"

"A sign of the Zodiac—Capricornus. And the first, like an M, is the sign of Scorpio. Now do you begin to understand?"

"Of course. There are twelve signs in the Zodiac. So there must be twelve behind the revolutionary

movement, and that is evidently the name by which they are known."

"And if I'm right," said Brandon, "the Zodiac is divided into trigons or four sets of three, representing earth, air, fire, and water. Each trigon no doubt has its own particular function."

"And you think," said Kavanagh, "that the Twelve composing the Zodiac and controlling the revolutionary movement are the same as those known to the occult groups as the Hidden Chiefs?"

"Yes, since both acknowledge the existence of a secret directorate, which in both cases is seen to consist of twelve, and since both are working towards the same end, it seems to me highly probable."

"But if the occult groups, at any rate the rank and file amongst them, are not consciously working for revolution, what is their common aim?"

"The absolute destruction of the existing order of things. One might describe it as the philosophy of the *tabula rasa*. No doubt some of them are genuine idealists; they believe that the world at present is all wrong, that the human race has got off the track, and that everything must be swept away and started afresh. Others again are simply out for themselves. One must remember that to work for the destructionists is a very paying job. A soap-box orator who might get two pounds a week speaking for the Conservatives can make four or five times that sum preaching Communism. An author who glorifies vice or ridicules patriotism is certain of a big boost in the Press and consequently of sales running into thousands. As you once said—*all the money's on that side*. As long as they'll help in the work of destruction any writer, speaker, or publicist of average ability can be sure of

funds. With this end in view, they work along different lines. Some are out to destroy our political institutions, some to do away with what they call 'conventional morality,' others to reverse our accepted canons of art or literature, others again to undermine patriotism and the national traditions on which our civilisation is built. And all, practically all, whether on the political or the occult side of the movement, are out to do away with Christianity. In this whole scheme of demolition, which they call the 'Great Work,' all see the realisation either of their philosophic dreams or of their own racial or individual ambitions, for whilst actuated by different motives, on one point they are all united—the necessity for the *clean sweep*. Until they've brought that off they'll work together and enlist supporters all over the world. The call to destruction makes a tremendous appeal."

"Still," said Kavanagh, "I can't conceive of a vast world movement organised merely by destructionists. There must be some more definite motive at the back of it all."

"Of course, the destructionists are only the instruments—the dynamic force set in motion by the controlling brains of the Zodiac. *They* have a definite enough motive."

"Which is——"

"World power. Already powerful, they want to sweep away everything that stands between them and absolute domination of the world."

"And who are they?"

"Ah! that's the great mystery—the mystery that's puzzled every investigator for a hundred and fifty years. What Joseph de Maistre called 'the great European secret' perhaps. Only it's no longer

European, it's world-wide. If we could discover that, the whole conspiracy might be laid bare. Their secret has been marvellously well kept."

"Do you think it's baffled even the Secret Service?"

"I don't suppose the Secret Service has ever got on to it. As I said to you once before, it's not their job to enquire into hidden causes, but merely to follow current events. They're not out, as I am, to get to the bottom of the world movement of which Bolshevism is only one phase."

"And you've no idea yourself?"

"Nothing definite—only surmises. The one thing I feel certain of is that they control colossal wealth. Remember, I say *control*, not possess. It's not a case of merely rich men, even of very rich men, with millions invested in national industries that bring them in gigantic incomes. What we've got to realise is the existence of men who control vast sources of wealth, not single industries, not even a series of mines or factories, but large shares in many different industries in their own countries, together with their affiliated interests abroad—part of the coal here, part of the steel here, part of the shipping elsewhere, so that their resources are beyond reckoning. Take Ludwig Schneewald, for example, whose operations extend over the whole world. He owns railways in one country, fifty per cent. of the iron and steel trade in a second, so that no one else can get a monopoly—he's always just strong enough to defeat them. Then he runs the army of a certain small republic, the navy of another, controls armament works in different countries likely to be at war with each other, so that whichever loses Ludwig Schneewald stands to win. If one could draw a sketch of Schneewald's spider web all over the

world it would make your brain whirl. And Schneewald's only one of these spiders. There must be half a dozen or more controlling as many interests—Geldbeutel of Frankfurt, Aaron Fuchsbein of the U.S.A., Oscar Franklin of New York and London, Nahum Zimarkara all over the east of Europe, and Fritz Chaikoff all over the south. Then of course there's Sir Paul Greenworthy, formerly Grünwald, one of the men most interested in the artificial silk trade of London, a bank or two abroad, besides owning big interests in ships, acetic acid, cotton and forests in different parts of the world."

"Yes, of course the power such men wield must be terrific. You think they're members of the Zodiac?"

"Who can say? One mustn't jump to conclusions. But given the existence of a vast reservoir of wealth on which the revolutionaries can draw for their war chest, I don't see who is more likely to provide it. In fact, I see no other answer to the question you once asked me: 'Where does all the money come from?' It can't come from national capitalists who could have no interest in promoting wars or revolutions and who depend on stability."

"But how can revolutions profit even international financiers?"

"One can make profit out of anything provided one knows beforehand what's going to happen."

"And do they know?"

"Yes. Their Intelligence Service is the most marvellous in the world."

Brandon paused for a moment and then went on:

"If I'm right in identifying these men—or some of these men—with the Zodiac, I'm inclined to think that money is not their only asset. In other words,

I think that some of the Zodiac may not be men of vast wealth but of vast intelligence, providing the organising brains behind the movement. And also the mass hypnotism that's exercised over the minds of the public to-day. How else are we to explain the fact that for no apparent cause, in defiance of all reason, we find everyone repeating the same thing at the same moment, even though it contradicts all they said yesterday—swayed now in this direction, now in that, as at the wave of a conductor's baton? The direction must come from somewhere."

"Don't you think largely from the Press?"

"Yes. But who controls the Press? What makes so-called constitutional papers boom every subversive theory and suppress contrary propaganda? There must be some powerful influence in the background working, not only through the Press, but through every means of publicity—broadcasting, the cinema, and so on."

"And that power is the Zodiac? Twelve super-men like sort of wireless stations sending out messages all over the world?"

"Yes. I don't mean that I think twelve men alone could supply the whole force of the movement, but, given twelve controlling minds with, perhaps, a trigon of three as an inner directorate and one Supreme Head above the Twelve, it is possible to imagine how through the outer rings of agents running into thousands, all over the world, vast currents of thought may be set in motion. And if, in opposition to all this, there is no body of dominating thought nor any organisation worthy of the name, if, on the contrary, the opposing forces are all disunited and quarrelling amongst themselves, what is there to stop the Zodiac

obtaining control of the whole world ? ”

“ I wonder why they should want to be more powerful than they are already.”

“ Oh, at present there are limits to their powers. As long as national traditions, private property, and religion exist, as long as there are Kings, Presidents, and Cabinets, they can't become the absolute masters of the world. They want a completely free hand. Believing themselves to be supermen—as to a certain extent they are, if only by their manipulation of finance and their power of controlling opinions by careful propaganda and mass suggestion—they feel themselves called upon to control the destinies of the human race and to remodel the world according to their own ideas.”

“ Then you think that in a sense they are idealists ? ”

“ Not for a moment. They are simply out for power. But regarding the majority of the human race as mere cattle, they believe their rôle should be to drive them. And they may possibly reason that the cattle would be better off under their control than when allowed to gore each other or run amok as they do at present. Democracy of course is the last thing they've any use for.”

“ Though they work through democratic movements ? ”

“ Yes, in order to turn the cattle against their present drivers.”

“ I see. It's ingenious and horrible. Diabolical, in fact. So diabolical that I can't help wondering—don't think this idiotic, Jimmy—whether there's not some supernatural power at the back of it all. You don't believe that ? ”

“ Yes, I do,” Brandon said slowly. He was silent

for a moment and then added : " I quite believe the Powers of Darkness are behind it. How else can one account for the anti-religious frenzy of the revolutionaries from the Jacobins to the Bolsheviks ? Still, the devil must work through human agents. One can't imagine Satan editing a newspaper or running a cinema. The Zodiac are his ministers, ready for love of wealth or power to carry out his purpose."

" And there's no way of defeating them," said Kavanagh, " but with the help of the Powers of Light. That's why we ought to invoke them, and organise. The only hope would be a mass thought movement on our side. But have we got any dominating minds to start it or to control it once it has been started ?"

" I think we have minds capable of dominating but not working in unison and without the knowledge how to use their power. The other side have made a definite study of how to work on the minds of others, to capture them and make them serve their purpose. We have never attempted to master the art of mass suggestion and propaganda."

" Yet the masses in England remain remarkably sound *au fond*," said Kavanagh. " Look how they responded to the country's call in 1914. The whole nation, with the exception of a few Socialists, was one blazing mass of patriotic fervour. The same thing began again during the General Strike in 1926 ; if it had gone on ten days longer I believe Bolshevism in this country would have been killed for ever."

" Which is perhaps why it was brought to a hasty and inconclusive ending ! The occult forces found themselves up against a great tidal wave of national feeling they had not reckoned on. As you say, the

British people are perfectly sound *au fond*. But they are not given to thinking out problems, which makes them excellent material for dominating minds to work on. Too often they are subjected to influences from the other side. But because of their inherent soundness they're quite ready to follow the right lead when it's given them. In 1914, for example, it was given them. The dominating minds on our side then were united and organised. Confronted by a tangible and physical danger the best brains in the army, navy, and elsewhere formed themselves into a body and, supported by the popular Press, were able to generate the wave of patriotic fervour that swept the country. For the time being the secret forces at work were powerless to withstand it. This development of the war was a frightful blow to their plans. They had counted on England not coming in. But they continued to work in the background in the way that came to be known as the Hidden Hand.

" Since 1914 the dominating personalities on our side have either been killed off or have grown old and tired, or in some way or another have been relegated to obscurity—the mass force they once exercised was broken up. For with the Armistice the nation's destinies ceased to be influenced by military leaders and passed into the hands of politicians—with what results we know. Then the hidden powers could muster their forces, raising up only those statesmen whom they could control and placing their agents in every key position. It's true, as you say, that for a few days in 1926 something of the spirit that animated the nation during the war revived again under the influence of a fresh set of personalities, less commanding than those of 1914, yet capable of giving the required lead in view

of the national emergency. But the moment was too brief to turn the tide."

"Yes, to-day the public has abjured nearly everything it thought in 1914. It collects in masses round the Cenotaph on Armistice Day, it wears its poppies dutifully, but it repudiates everything the men it mourns died for," Kavanagh said bitterly. "It has become the fashion to make heroes of politicians who betrayed us then and who to-day would sacrifice every interest of the British Empire."

"The effect of mass suggestion and unceasing propaganda. One can't believe that in twenty years the character of the nation can have changed fundamentally."

"Then it will take a fresh crisis to produce counter-mass suggestion, since in between the crises our forces are disbanded."

"Yes, whilst those of the other side remain permanently mobilised. They never cease to carry on their work of disintegration; we only stand together when tangible disaster threatens. What is needed is a permanent group of dominating minds on our side to send out counter-currents."

"A sort of counter-Zodiac!" said Kavanagh.

"Just so. That's the very idea I'm working up to. Once we've got the facts about the plot and, if possible, the names of the Twelve forming the Zodiac, we can put the whole thing before the country."

CHAPTER VI

ROSAMUND'S STORY

THE next morning Rosamund arrived at Kavanagh's rooms paler than ever and with the dark shadows he had sometimes noticed round her eyes.

"I can't think what's the matter with her," he said to Brandon as they went off to lunch together at the Carlton Club. "She swears it isn't simply that she's been dancing late."

"No, and it isn't physical fatigue. She's got something on her mind, Terence."

"I've always felt that. But I can't for the life of me make out what it can be." To himself he added: "But it's connected in some way with that odd mark on her arm I noticed in the punt. Why did she get so hot and bothered when I asked about it?"

"Do you mind if I try to get it out of her?" said Brandon. "I know a little about psychology, and I think I might be able to help her."

"Go ahead then by all means." Anything to lay the ghost in that haunted room of her mind about which she had spoken on the terrace of the House!

As if by chance Brandon dropped in that evening at Kavanagh's rooms just as Rosamund was tidying up the day's work. She was looking still so shaken and made so little effort to appear herself that no diplomacy was required to lead up to the subject.

"Well, Rosamund," Brandon said, going straight up to her, "not feeling well? Been sleeping badly?"

Rosamund made no answer, but crossed to the window and looked out. Then, turning round, she said in a stifled voice :

"Something dreadful happened last night."

"Ah?" said Brandon.

"I don't know how to describe it. Perhaps you'll think me mad. But—but——"

"Go on. Whatever it is, we shall understand and try to help you."

"Well, when I went up to my room last night I suddenly had the most terrible sensation of evil all around me. It seemed as if all the Powers of Darkness were attacking me—it was hideous. I've had dreams like this before, but never felt anything like it when I was awake."

She paused and went on :

"I think it all began with the talk we had here yesterday. D'you remember something I said to Terence just before I left?"

"Yes," said Kavanagh. "You said: 'You're fighting for a great cause and I'm with you in the fight.'"

Rosamund nodded.

"That was it. That was what brought things to a crisis and made them muster all their forces. I'd definitely gone over to the other side, you see, and they were determined not to lose their hold on me. So they gathered in one terrific onslaught. I felt as if all hell was closing round me."

"But who are 'they'?" Kavanagh asked bewildered.

"Wait a minute, Terence," said Brandon; "I think I understand. Come and sit down and try to tell us quite calmly about it."

Rosamund sank down obediently on the divan beside him as if exhausted.

"That's all. There's nothing more to tell you," she said faintly.

"Oh yes, there is," Brandon said in a voice at the same time practical and sympathetic. "There's lots more to tell. You've had these dreams a long while, Rosamund?"

"Yes, for seven years."

"Ever since you've had something on your mind?"

"How do you know that?" Rosamund asked in surprise.

"Because the bad dreams and experiences you had last night don't come to sane and normal people like yourself without some reason. There's something in your life, something you've done in the past, you bitterly regret. You can't shake off the memory of it. It lies there, deep down in your subconsciousness, and rises to your mind in dreams. Let's have it up to the surface now and see if we can't get rid of it once and for all."

And as Rosamund still hesitated Brandon went on:

"You must make an effort. Tell us how it all started and how 'they,' whoever 'they' are, came to have a hold over you."

Rosamund was silent for a moment. Then, as if making a sudden decision, she said:

"Yes, I believe it would help me—and you too, perhaps. But it's a long story. Have you time to listen?"

"All the time there is," said Kavanagh.

"Well, seven years ago," began Rosamund, "I was up at the 'Varsity going in for a degree in philosophy and history. I'd always had a craving to study

metaphysics, and though Mother thought it was a silly whim, she gave in at last and let me go. If only she hadn't ! ”

Rosamund paused a moment and then went on :

“ Philosophy's a risky subject to embark on, shakes your faith in everything, starts you questioning all the settled solid things you've taken so far for granted. Gradually I got drawn into occultism. You see, when you've had your mind swept and garnished, then it's the chance for the seven devils to get in. So when two friends of mine, Peter Markham and Jack Edgingly, took up occult study, I turned to it with a sort of relief from the materialism to which psychology had reduced me. Peter was a boy whom I'd known slightly all my life, but up at Oxford we often met and at last we got engaged. We'd a lot in common, and now occultism seemed to draw us close together.”

Rosamund was silent for a moment, evidently absorbed by the memories her story called up. Then brushing them aside, she said :

“ There was a small set of people up at the 'Varsity who were keen on that kind of thing. The centre of this group was Doctor Hensley, a Fellow of Saint Stephen's—a man with a strong magnetic personality. The others looked upon him with great respect, so we were naturally flattered when he asked all us three to dine. After that we were often at his house, where we met all sorts of what we called 'interesting people'—writers, artists, politicians, foreigners as well as English. The one that impressed me most was Doctor Otto Brinkdorff, the German philosopher, as he was called—in reality, as I see now, simply a propagandist working on occult lines. Of course I didn't realise it at the time ; I thought him wonderful, as everyone else did in

that set. Doctor Hensley had got him down to Oxford to lecture, and everybody crowded to hear him. I don't know what he said that impressed them, for afterwards one could remember nothing in particular, but I suppose it was a sort of mass hypnotism that made them all admire him as they did. The reason Doctor Hensley picked us out for attention was evidently because our interest in occultism made him think we should be easily open to that sort of suggestion. That was why he and his circle wanted to rope us in, and rope us in they did !

" Looking back on it all, I see now that the whole thing was mixed up with politics. They gradually undermined all our ideas of patriotism as well as religion. It was only afterwards I heard Doctor Hensley had been pro-German during the war and had tried to check recruiting. A good many of the undergraduates at Oxford were Pacifists and Socialists, and all sorts of things of that kind. Atheists too, of course. They seemed to become like that automatically soon after they arrived. I've seen boys come up to the 'Varsity quite ordinary, cheery, patriotic boys, and by the time they'd been there a month or two they had changed completely. This didn't strike me so much at the time—it's only now I realise what it all meant."

Brandon nodded at Kavanagh.

" You see, Terence, the two lines I told you of—the political and occult, both leading to the same thing in the end."

" Yes. I wonder how much of the anti-patriotism in the Oxford debating societies—resolutions not to fight for king or country, and so on—are due to influences we know nothing of. Apart from the ideas

pumped into them by Hensley, if they have an alien of the type of Brinkdorff down to lecture to them, it's not likely to fire them with much enthusiasm for the Empire."

"And Brinkdorff wasn't the only one," said Rosamund. "There were others. Krovsky, for example, who talked about the wonders of Soviet Russia and ran a settlement himself near Amiens. They all seemed to have a curious kind of assurance as if—I don't quite know how to express it—they were not mere individuals expressing their personal opinions, but members of some powerful organisation that was bound one day to get the upper hand."

Rosamund paused reflectively and then went on again :

"After a while we began to feel that there was something behind this group of Doctor Hensley's—something like a secret society, in fact. At first they only dropped hints about it, but gradually they became more explicit, and one day Doctor Hensley definitely told us that there was an occult society called 'The Order of the Phoenix,' to which he and his friends belonged, and asked if we would like to join it. Of course we said we would—we were young, you see, and game for any adventures. And to belong to a secret society seemed frightfully thrilling."

"Like long ago in the Square garden?" Kavanagh said with a smile.

Rosamund smiled too, for the first time.

"Yes. Rather childish of us really, wasn't it? But we were so dominated by Doctor Hensley that we'd have done anything he told us—followed him into a lion's cage if he'd ordered it. So the following week we were all three—Peter, Jack, and I—initiated into

the first degree of the Order of the Phoenix in Holland Park. A certain Countess Zapraksy was one of the leading members."

"Ah!" said Kavanagh. "That's interesting."

"You've heard of her?"

"Yes. But go on."

"Part of the ceremony consisted in branding us each with the seal of the Order—a circle with a dot in the middle. It was done with a small red-hot iron."

There was silence. Then Rosamund said in a voice that trembled slightly:

"Now you understand, Terence, why I didn't want you to see the mark on my shoulder that evening in the punt?"

And with a sudden movement she slipped off the shoulder-strap of her frock and showed the red mark on the smooth skin.

Kavanagh turned away with an involuntary shudder. The sight jarred on him unaccountably. Rosamund saw this, and quickly replacing her shoulder-strap, went on with her story.

"Of course in the Temple everything was made to appear very beautiful—the dim lights, the incense, the weird sort of Eastern chants seemed to cast a spell over our minds, and for months when we attended the meetings at the Temple we never dreamt there was anything more behind it. The Chiefs told us that if we studied diligently the books and manuscripts they gave us to read, meditated, and did the prescribed exercises, we should gradually develop latent faculties that would give us powers of which ordinary people knew nothing. And the promise of power is very tempting, especially when one's quite young. So in this way we got led on from one thing to another.

"I can't tell you what happened at some of these ceremonies in the Temple. I don't even remember very clearly—only an odd sense of unreality, of being in a dream. There was a horrible person who used to come there sometimes—Gustav Mervine. Normally I should have loathed him, but somehow all one's natural instinct to recoil from such a creature seemed withered up—do you wonder that I hated to tell you all this, Terence?—but that's the effect of occultism, it turns everything upside down, changes all values, so that you love what you once hated and hated what you used to love. It destroys all sense of truth, too. People who've gone in long for occultism have lived so much in that unreal world that they can't distinguish truth from falsehood and lie without knowing it. Perhaps I didn't get so far as that, but I must have got pretty far, for after about a year the Chiefs of the Temple, evidently feeling they were sure of us, let us know there was an inner Order to which we could be admitted if we wished. We were told, however, that for this purpose we should have to go and stay at Charenton in order to study under a high initiate called Raskoff. We all agreed to go and spent some months there. Raskoff was certainly an extraordinary man, a very powerful occultist whose system consisted mainly in low diet and hard manual labour."

Brandon nodded. "In order to induce anæmia of the brain and make it easier for him to gain control."

Rosamund looked surprised.

"Do you know about him?"

"Yes, but go on."

"Raskoff really is a superman—more so than

Brinkdorff, the German occultist, whom we met again at Charenton. Well, Raskoff thought he had got us all cold. We'd gone obediently through his course, agreeing to everything, submitted to his plan of bending our wills to his by spoiling the work he'd made us do. One day, when he'd ordered us to make a garden bench, and we'd toiled from morning to night to get it finished, he briefly ordered us to break it up for firewood! We did it without a murmur. And so, not unnaturally, he thought we were his—body and soul—like all the other wretched creatures at Charenton, whom he'd reduced to mere spineless automatons ready to say or do anything he told them.

“So one morning—it was Good Friday, I remember—Raskoff told us we were to be taken a step farther by being initiated into the more secret Order to which he belonged, at the head Temple in Paris. We were to go there that night by motor, and all that day, in preparation for the ceremony, we were given nothing to eat and drink but a little bread and water. It was already dark when the car arrived; we all three got in and Raskoff with us. During the long drive no one spoke—we were supposed to be engaged in meditation. As soon as we entered the fortifications Raskoff took out three black silk handkerchiefs and bound them over our eyes, explaining that every new initiate must enter the Lodge blindfold. We were too much under his domination to make any protest, but I remember thinking that the real object of this was to prevent us seeing where we were being taken. So when the car stopped I contrived to slip the bandage from my eyes for a second whilst Raskoff was helping the other two out of the car. I saw then that we were in a narrow street in front of an old *porte-cochère*, at the

side of which I noticed a small tobacconist's which I tried to memorise. I had only time for this one glimpse before pushing the bandage back into place. Then I felt myself led across the pavement, and by the feel of cobblestones under my feet I guessed we were being taken through the *porte-cochère* across a courtyard, where we were halted and could hear Raskoff opening a door. After that we seemed to be going down a passage, then another door was opened, and at the same time the bandages were taken off our eyes.

"We found ourselves at the entrance of a long, low, narrow room, feebly lit by a few wax tapers. It looked like a sort of chapel, with a tawdry altar at the end and a priest with a veil across his face standing before it intoning something in Latin. The rows of *prie-Dieu* were filled with people, and we took our places with the rest. Some of them looked queer and decadent, but others quite ordinary. There was an old man with a beautiful face—noble and benevolent looking. I don't know whether it was the oppressive smell of Eastern incense or the horrible sense of evil in the air that made me feel faintly sick. Gradually I realised that the ceremony which was going on was a parody of the Catholic Mass. After a while the priest began to utter incantations, first in Latin, then in Hebrew. From the first I understood that these were evocations addressed to Satan, the Prince of Darkness. Then followed terrible imprecations in which the "congregation" joined, cursing God and Christ and the Holy Virgin—the so-called worshippers working themselves up into a frenzy of hate and fury. The old man with the benevolent face was one of the loudest."

Rosamund paused, pale and trembling, and covered her face with her hands.

"But that was not all," she said at last in a stifled voice. "There was worse, far worse to come. At last, with the horror of it all, I fainted. At any rate, I remember no more. I never went through the ceremony of initiation for which we had been brought there, and I knew nothing more until I found myself back in my bed at Charenton. The next morning I was very ill, but Raskoff insisted on our all three appearing before him. As we went towards his room Peter managed to whisper to me that after I had been taken out of the Temple the black mass had been celebrated, followed by the ceremony of initiation, that he had refused to be initiated, but that Jack Edgingly had gone through with it. And he added: 'We've got to get out of this as quickly as possible.' Raskoff was white with rage when we entered, but he controlled himself, and said that now we had gone so far along the road of occult knowledge the time had come for us to make our choice as to which turning we should take. We had to choose between the Powers of Light and the Powers of Darkness, between the White Lodge of which we had visited a Temple the night before or the Black Lodges in which we had been brought up. We knew enough of his perverted phraseology to understand that by the powers of light he meant what we called the powers of darkness and by the Black Lodge the Christian Church. He ended by saying with a contemptuous glance at Peter: 'If you are afraid, I have no further use for you—otherwise great powers may be conferred on you. So I ask you finally: Do you stand for God or Lucifer?'

"I suppose it was this direct challenge that brought

us to our senses. Peter and I looked at each other, then with one voice we cried : ' We stand for God and we leave you for ever.' Raskoff flashed one look of fury on us, then quickly recovering himself, he smiled a diabolical smile and waved us to the door. Wretched Jack Edgingly said nothing. We left him to his fate and came away. Afterwards we heard he was on the streets of Paris—a shattered wreck, for Raskoff, having tested him in various ways, and seeing that he hadn't the force of character to become an expert occultist, had no further use for him and threw him over, ruined body and soul. That was what made Peter see red—for he was always fond of Jack in spite of his weakness—and as soon as we got back to England he told me he'd determined to embark on a crusade against occultism and show the whole thing up.

"He tried to enlist the help of several parsons he knew, but either they didn't care or they didn't dare to stand by him, so he went over to the Church of Rome and got all the encouragement he needed. Then he started in—hired halls and gave lectures, to which people came out of curiosity and murmured, ' Isn't it too dreadful ? ' then went away and forgot all about it. No politicians would take the matter up ; the Home Office and the police were too busy seeing that people didn't buy chocolate or cigarettes after eight o'clock to bother about secret societies or even black masses. For black masses—not perhaps so horrible as those in Paris—do take place in London under the direction of high initiates. But members of secret societies are to be found in Government Departments and even holding responsible posts in the Church. Of course they were all terrified of Peter's revelations, and tried to stop him by ridicule. Then when that

failed they started a whisper-drive that he was mad, that there was insanity in the family, that he'd been in an asylum, and in a few weeks all the parrots of the London and Oxford drawing-rooms were repeating that lie. Peter was as sane as you two are to-day—not a soul in his family had ever been mad—but from that moment they tried to work on his mind by occult methods. They'd always boasted they could make people ill and even die by means of what they called punitive currents set in motion by thought; the heart and the brain were their special points of attack."

Brandon shook his head. "They may say so. But their real weapon is fear."

"Well, anyhow, it was the brain they went for with Peter, because you see they wanted to prove him mad. At first he held out, but the power they had over him was too great—too great."

"How was that?" asked Kavanagh. "Surely by that time he'd broken away from them?"

"Physically—yes. He never went near them. But they had a hold over him as they had over all of us. You see, we'd taken the oath at our initiation into the Order of the Phoenix." And seeing Kavanagh's puzzled expression she went on:

"Perhaps you don't know what that means—the occult power of the oath. It's the greatest weapon of all secret societies. Outsiders sometimes wonder why one should be made to take an oath—wouldn't a simple promise do? What they don't understand is that it's the fact of taking the solemn oath of secrecy and blind obedience under pain of terrible penalties that gives secret societies the power they exercise over their members. It's by that they hold them. That's why it's such folly for people to think they can go into

occult societies in order to find out their secrets and come out unscathed. Peter hadn't realised their power. He thought that as he'd been tricked into joining these societies by false pretences he had a right to expose them publicly. He even thought he could defy them. But by degrees a change came over him. I noticed that his mind was becoming confused—his memory seemed to be failing."

Then in a low voice, staring straight before her as if looking at some distant vision, Rosamund said :

"At last—in the end Peter went mad. One day I was called to him—his mind was a blank. He's been in an asylum now for five years—a hopeless case, they say. Sometimes I go to see him, but I don't think he knows me. Only once in a lucid interval he seemed his old self again and said : 'Rosamund, what's the matter with me?' I said : 'You've been ill a long time, Peter.' Then he said : 'Yes, I remember, and it all happened through Doctor Hensley.' After that his mind went again. That's the end of the story."

There was a long silence. Kavanagh sat bewildered, his clean outdoor mind refusing to grasp such things as these. Then he said :

"It's a terrible story, Rosamund. It was good of you to tell us. But I'm afraid it must have been very painful for you, going all over it again."

"I wouldn't have done it for the world if it hadn't been to help you. But now I know what you and Jimmy are doing, I felt you ought to know more about what you are up against. It's not really a political battle, but a war between the powers of good and evil."

"But the powers of evil can't hurt us," said Kavanagh.

"Not you, perhaps. You've never established any contact with them, they might sit round for ever directing punitive currents against you, and you'd never feel it. Still, they'll try to get at you by other means. They tried to down me as soon as they knew I had turned against them. Sometimes the telephone bell would ring, and when I answered it, voices would say: 'Don't think you can escape us! We're going to ruin you—to ruin you. We shall pursue you wherever you go to the last day of your life!' Think what that would mean to you in your political career, Terence! For they'll ruin you if they can, once you come out openly against them. Remember, they have their agents everywhere."

Kavanagh looked across at Brandon. Was all this possible in twentieth-century England? For the moment he couldn't help wondering whether Rosamund had been carried away by her imagination. But Brandon nodded assent.

"There are some queer cases of this sort on record," he said. "It almost seems as if they have been able sometimes to injure people. Remember some of the mysterious deaths and illnesses we've discussed that have seemed, to say the least of it, too opportune. But of course there may be some natural explanation. Poison, for example. Anyhow, whatever powers they may profess, the great thing is not to fear them. For the so-called power of occultism and black magic is really a sort of hypnotism working on minds weakened by fear. If really they've been able to injure people it is those who, as Rosamund says, have established a contact with them by taking an oath and joining some occult group, and who are then afraid of their vengeance. Believe me, Rosamund, there's no

'occult power' in the oath itself, there's only the fear of what may happen if you break it that can hurt you. It was that that preyed on Peter's mind and sent him off his head."

"But Peter didn't seem to be afraid."

"No. But deep down in his subconsciousness fear was lurking. It's the same with you, although you may not know it. That's the real cause of the dreams that trouble you."

Rosamund shook her head.

"I can't stop myself dreaming."

"Yes, you can. Quite simply. Listen, Rosamund, you've got to get all this out of your mind. Come and talk to me about it whenever you feel inclined, and I'll soon show you how these dreams and experiences like you had last night can be prevented. It's really that you're afraid to face things in your past life. But haven't we all done things in our past we're sorry for, that we're ashamed of? I'm sure I have—done worse things than you have. If you'll let me, I'll make you see that there's nothing to be afraid of. It's all over and done with. Put it behind you once and for all, and you'll find that these dreams and memories will cease to trouble you."

"Ah, if only I could feel that!" Rosamund said with a sigh.

"You can, my dear, believe me—and trust me too," said Brandon, with a feeling in his voice that surprised both his companions and himself. "I've had some experience of this sort of thing before, and I believe I can help you. Remember, the object of occultism is to enslave the mind, so the cure is to set it free by thinking for oneself."

"Ah, you're right there, Jimmy. I'd realised that

already. That's why I wanted to work for Terence. You see, I'd discovered that part of the cure for myself. I felt I must get right away from the whole thing. But more than that, I mustn't love or hate or feel—I must have no emotions. I must only work."

"There you're hopelessly wrong, my dear Rosamund!" cried Brandon. "You must love and hate, but in the right way, as you'll see in time."

Rosamund smiled, half sadly. "Well, who knows?"

CHAPTER VII

KAVANAGH HUNTS FOR DRAGONS

ROSAMUND's story had the effect of further changing Kavanagh's outlook. His political development had advanced in three stages. At first his interest in world affairs had been quite impersonal and dispassionate. He had felt it his duty to offer himself as a parliamentary candidate to the only Party he believed to be capable of stopping the rot that was spreading through the country and of defeating the Bolshevik conspiracy. For to him, at that date, as to others of his kind, it was Bolshevism as a system, organised by the present rulers of Russia, that constituted the menace; once the Soviet regime fell—as it must do sooner or later—he had imagined that the trouble would be ended.

Then his talks with Brandon had taken him a step farther, and shown him that Moscow was only the visible headquarters of the world conspiracy, and consequently that the fight against Bolshevism was only a part of the war to be waged. But still he had continued to occupy himself mainly with the political side of the situation and to regard the secret forces, of which Brandon had spoken, as a "side show," the very existence of which was more or less hypothetical. It was not that he underrated the value of Brandon's investigations, for he knew the amazing industry and exactness he brought to his work, only he felt vaguely that Brandon's interest in this particular line of

research might have led him to over-estimate its importance.

But now Rosamund's story had brought the whole thing home to him in a way no amount of type-written documents or secret files could have done. "The Hidden Power" had ceased to be a vague term denoting something that need never come within the range of his experience, but a very real force, a force so potent that it had been able to blast the life of the woman he loved. And as he thought of all she had passed through, his whole soul rose in revolt at the system of legislation that could let such things be whilst D.O.R.A. interfered with the most harmless distractions and amenities of everyday existence. Well, if the defence of the realm did not consist in defending youth and innocence against these diabolical influences, it was up to everyone who called himself a man to rise and fight them on his own account. In his attitude there was something of the knight-errant as well as the crusader. It was no longer only a sacred cause to which he wanted to devote himself, he longed also to go out and slay the dragons that had lain in his lady's path.

But were the dragons to be found? How was he, a simple soldier, who had never dabbled in the occult, to find his way into a Temple of the Phoenix or strike the path that led obscurely to the Hidden Chiefs?

"If only Rosamund could put us on the track of some of these people!" he said to Brandon. "By the way, now that she's told us her story, don't you think the time has come to take her more into our confidence?"

Brandon thought for a moment and then answered slowly:

"Yes, I think it has. It's terribly difficult of course to know whom one can trust. Lots of fellows in our line of business go on the tack of trusting no one. It's easy to do that, but it gets you nowhere. If you're a complete clam you'll find everyone else a clam too. The thing is to know just how much one can say and to whom one can say it."

"Exactly. It seems to me that one may lose as much by saying nothing as by saying too much. It was the little we did say to Rosamund that opened her lips and led to her telling us all she did."

"And she must know a good deal more. Yes, I believe she can be trusted, and she might be very useful to us. The line she's been on is the one I'm just now keenest on following up because it's the most difficult to get on to. The Communists' game is comparatively easy to keep track of; they make no secret of what they're out for or of the fact they're run by Moscow, and investigations lead no farther than that."

"No. I suppose one might call Moscow merely the G.H.Q. on the front of the revolutionary movement. What we want to get at is the War Office or the brains at the back of it all."

"I don't think I should give Moscow even as much importance as that. I should call it merely the G.H.Q. of the class war, which is only a part of the revolutionary movement."

"But which surely includes the war against religion?"

"As an accessory to the class war. You can't make the working classes see red as long as they believe in a Hereafter. Convince them that this life is all, and they're ready to turn and pillage everything—we all would, it's human nature. Inhibitions

produced by generations of religious belief and religious teaching are all that stand between us and the jungle. The revolutionaries of all ages have recognised that."

"But don't you think that there's a real war against religion for its own sake as well? Waged for the pure love of evil?"

"Yes, and that's not done by violence. Peaceful undermining of all religious beliefs is far more effectual than the ravings of the Bezbojniki of Russia. It's the brains behind all that sort of thing we want to get at. And one's more likely to do it by following up the kind of people Rosamund's been in touch with than by tracking down Communists. They're much nearer the centre of things. I doubt whether any of our native 'Reds' know anything about the Zodiac or ever heard of its existence. I doubt whether even the present rulers of Russia have ever come directly into touch with it. But men like Doctor Hensley may very well be in contact with one or more of the Hidden Twelve. That's the sort of clue Rosamund might help us to follow. Let's ring her up and ask if we can drop in this evening—then we can talk it all over with her."

The three had often foregathered lately in Rosamund's sitting-room on the ground floor of the little house in Hertford Street, where she lived with her mother. And sometimes Kavanagh, feeling that Brandon could do more to help Rosamund if they were left alone, kept tactfully away, and the two would sit on into the night talking—Rosamund unburdening her mind of the memories that tormented her, Brandon showing her step by step how these latent fears might be met and conquered. It was extraordinary, the girl felt, the way Jimmy seemed to understand and to give her strength. Gradually

dreams ceased to trouble her and her peace of mind returned.

So this evening they met again, and Rosamund was let into the secret of Brandon's "double life" and of the quest on which he and Kavanagh were engaged.

"It's frightfully interesting," she said at last, "and frightfully important. And if all I've been through can be made of use to you it won't have been in vain."

For a moment she sat looking at them thoughtfully and then said:

"Now that you've got on to the occult side of the business, I think you ought to know more."

"Yes, what we want most is documentary evidence," said Brandon. "All you've told us is extraordinarily interesting, but we want names, dates, facts that no one can dispute."

"Then would these help you?"

And getting up, Rosamund went to a cupboard from which she took out a large pile of documents and placed them on the table.

"The papers of the Order of the Phoenix and some other groups of the same kind."

"Capital," said Brandon. "That's just the sort of thing we want."

"I suppose," Rosamund went on meditatively, "that some people might say it was a breach of confidence for me to show them to you. For of course they're absolutely secret—only for the eyes of members. But Peter and I both felt that considering the way we were deceived on entering the Order, we were justified in treating our obligations as null and void. What do you say?"

"I say that of course you're justified," said Kava-

nagh. "If I pay for a course of Professor Robinson's Memory Training which I promise to regard as confidential, and then find it's a scheme for blowing up the Houses of Parliament, I'm not bound to keep it dark, am I? You went into this in all good faith, and found you had been trapped. Innocent people who are tricked into an oath of secrecy not to reveal what they believe to be harmless mysteries and then discover that they've been roped into a conspiracy, have every right to give the show away. In fact, it's their duty to prevent other victims being caught in the same way."

"Exactly," said Brandon. "So let's have a look at the documents, Rosamund."

"Right. Here they are. The little paper books are rituals—you can keep them if you like, Jimmy."

"Thanks," said Brandon. "They'll be an addition to my collection of masonic manuals. It's been a hobby of mine for years. I've got the rituals of the oddest kinds of Orders. The United States teem with them. By the way, do these give any signs and pass-words?" he added, picking up one of the books and turning over the pages.

"Yes, a few. And I can tell you others," said Rosamund.

"Good. It's always useful to learn a new grip or sign. One never knows when one may want to use it."

"But supposing anyone gives you a sign that you don't know the answer to?" asked Kavanagh.

"Then I invent one, and they imagine I've reached a higher grade than they have, and respect me accordingly. Oh! there's lots of fun to be got out of secret societies."

"Yes, as long as you keep outside them," Rosamund

said with a faint shudder. "It's no joke when you get into their power. They'll try to do something pretty hideous to me if they ever find out I've given them away."

"The only thing is to expose them before they can do that," Kavanagh said firmly.

"Terence, if you value your political career, don't attempt anything of the kind," said Rosamund. "Never give the slightest hint that you know anything about occult matters. Above all, don't breathe the words 'secret societies.'"

"But why? Publicity is the one way to kill them."

"Of course. But people won't believe you. They'll only think you're mad. And those who know better will make out you are in order to discredit you."

"Rosamund's right," said Brandon. "It's much better to keep this sort of thing to ourselves—to work underground as they do. Then, as I've said before, when we've got the whole plot with proofs that no one can dispute, we'll give it to the world."

"The first thing," said Kavanagh, "is surely to find out who some of the people are. Is there a list of membership amongst these papers, Rosamund?"

"Yes, here are some of the members of the Order of the Phoenix."

"Ah!" said Brandon. "Names and pseudonyms. That'll be jolly useful. Here we are: '*Celer ad Astra*' alias Doctor Hensley, '*Ora et vigila*,' Mrs. Murray Bateman—I suspect that good lady does more watching than praying, Terence—and here's Isidore Franklin, '*Cavendo tutus*.'"

"Yes, I expect Isidore takes jolly good care of his skin," laughed Kavanagh. "By the way," he went on, looking over Brandon's shoulder, "I see there's

Countess Zapraksy *alias* 'Quæro Lucem,' which reminds me that I've just had an invitation from Mrs. Murray Bateman to go and hear her speak at her house on Thursday. Shall I go?"

"I think it might be worth while," said Rosamund, "though I don't imagine she's a very high initiate. I only met her once. She lives abroad, in Italy, I believe, and only comes to England on visits."

"Go by all means, Terence," interposed Brandon. "From other things I've heard, I imagine the lady might be well worth studying—especially if Mrs. Murray Bateman is helping to run her."

Accordingly a hot afternoon on the following Thursday found Kavanagh struggling up the marble staircase of Mrs. Murray Bateman's house in Curzon Street with the usual crowd of curious women and odd-looking men who habitually flock to meetings where any new cult is to be discussed.

Countess Zapraksy, a robust lady with red hair and singularly piercing green eyes, was standing in the window shaking hands with the favoured few whom her hostess held worthy to be introduced to the prophetess of the New Psychism. Amongst these Kavanagh was not included, for which he felt thankful, as he was thus able to slip into a place near the doorway whence he could make his escape unobserved should the atmosphere become unbearable. Here he found himself seated next to Lady Caroline Wentlock, who greeted him with effusion.

"I'm so glad you've come to hear the Countess, she's simply wonderful. Have you studied the New Psychism before?"

"I can't say I have. But I'm longing to hear all about it."

Kavanagh's eyes wandered round the room. There was the usual contingent of old ladies who habitually frequent drawing-room meetings for whatever cause they may be held, and inevitably drop off to sleep as soon as the speaker has got under way. But there were a few young people too and quite a number of men. Amongst these Kavanagh recognised Isidore Franklin, looking on at the proceedings through half-shut eyes with his usual derisive smile playing around his lips. A middle-aged man with a singularly high-souled countenance was standing in the background, surrounded by a group of admiring women. A very remarkable face, thought Kavanagh. Who could he be? He decided to ask Lady Caroline.

"Why, don't you know?" she answered in surprise, "that is Doctor Hensley, the Fellow of Saint Stephen's, Oxford. A marvellous man, absolutely inspired, Major Kavanagh. I must introduce you to him."

So that was Dr. Hensley, the man with the saintly face and the diabolical powers of whom Rosamund had spoken! Kavanagh, thrilled at the discovery, was about to accept Lady Caroline's proposal with eagerness when the buzz of conversation suddenly ceased. For the Countess had ascended a small platform in front of the fireplace and was beginning her discourse. From this it appeared that about three years ago, when she was recovering from typhoid fever in Budapest, the Countess was transported—on the astral plane, of course—into a monastery in the very heart of the Gobi Desert, where she was initiated into all the mysteries of the universe.

"Rather a large order," Kavanagh could not refrain from murmuring to Lady Caroline. But she only put her fingers to her lips and whispered:

"Sh! it's all perfectly true. Listen to what she has to tell us."

As a result of this initiation, Countess Zapraksy went on to say, she was admitted into the inner circle of that ancient fraternity which had existed from the very beginning of time, though shrouded throughout the ages in secrecy and silence. In consequence, marvellous powers were conferred on her, and it was her one desire to use them in the service of humanity. Of course she could not disclose to them the secret of these powers, since that was a matter of long and strenuous initiation, and on that point her lips were sealed, but she would explain to them how by simple processes they could learn to develop certain latent faculties to a surprising degree. Kavanagh listened bewildered, whilst she described a system of deep breathing to be practised daily at the open window facing east, with one hand placed on the crown of the head in contact with the pineal gland, which was the seat of man's undeveloped powers. Then there were various formulæ to be repeated, hours to be spent in meditation, animal food to be abjured, and pulse preferred as a staple article of diet. It was also highly desirable to wear a string of blue glass beads round one's waist, next to the skin—but they *must* be blue, no other colour would have the same effect of charging the solar plexus with magnetic force. The body of adepts of the New Psychism, thus fortified, would be able to exercise an immense influence on the destinies of the human race, not only in the sphere of scientific and intellectual progress, but in the realm of politics, for they alone would be able to present an obstacle to the tide of Bolshevism that threatened to engulf the world. At this point even Kavanagh felt himself

carried away by the Countess's eloquence as she described the menace that the destructive theories of Moscow offered to the civilised world.

But before ending her lecture, Countess Zapraksy went on to say, she wished to draw the attention of her audience to a wonderful experiment that was being made in the art of healing. She herself lived in a villa—the Villa Pax Mundi—at Bogazzo, on the Italian Lakes, and only half a mile away on the Swiss side of the frontier a clinic named "Nirvana" had been recently established under the auspices of the New Psychism, where remarkable cures were effected by doctors who had studied the latest methods of osteopathy and electric treatment combined with the psychic methods of development she had already described. Funds, however, were needed to continue this great work, and she appealed to all present to contribute generously to the collection that would now be made in aid of the hospital. A plate was then handed round and returned to the Countess piled with notes and silver.

Throughout the lecture the audience had listened spellbound and, as the speaker descended heavily from the platform, women crowded round her begging for further details of her system.

Kavanagh, anxious to glean more information, made his way closer to the lady, and suddenly felt her eyes fixed on him with particular intentness. Disregarding the clamorous women at her side, she stretched out her hand and, beckoning him nearer, observed abruptly :

"I saw you listening very attentively to what I had to say. Is there anything you wish to ask me?"

Faced with this direct appeal even the Irishman's ready wit momentarily deserted him. There were

plenty of things he would like to ask her, but how could he throw a bomb into the midst of the faithful by a practical enquiry of the kind that rose to his lips?

But Countess Zapraksky was accustomed to be obeyed. "I see," she said firmly, "that you have a question to ask me. What is it?"

"Well, since you press me," began Kavanagh with some embarrassment, "I should like to ask, if it is not an impertinent question, What *are* the powers that have been conferred on you? I mean," he added, noticing the shocked look on the faces around him and the quickly repressed flash of annoyance in the eyes of the Countess, "I mean, what sort of powers are they? Are they muscular—or——"

"Of course they are not muscular," the lady answered sharply. "They have nothing at all to do with the physical plane, though undoubtedly they contribute to bodily vigour. No, the powers I possess are psychic—spiritual, if you will."

"But," persisted Kavanagh, now determined to go through with it, "what do they enable you to *do*?"

At this a murmur of dissent arose around him.

"Oh, Major Kavanagh," said Lady Caroline Wentlock, "how can the Countess tell you that? Don't you *feel* how marvellous she is!"

Countess Zapraksky flashed a grateful glance at the speaker. "Of course," she said, looking again at Kavanagh, "that is a matter I cannot explain. You must study my system for yourself and then you will understand." And turning a stalwart shoulder on him she moved away, escorted by an admiring throng in the direction of the dining-room, where tea was laid.

"That was very naughty of you, Major Kavanagh," said a voice at his side, and Kavanagh looked round

to see Myra Greenworthy smiling up into his face.

He had met her several times at dances since the dinner-party at the House of Commons, and rather liked her. She was so alive, so full of eager interest in everything going on around her that, provided one did not happen to be feeling below par, one felt exhilarated by her conversation. Kavanagh was quite glad to find her here, amongst this crowd of queer people.

"Come and have some tea or strawberries and cream," he said, nodding towards the laden refreshment table. Myra needed no pressing.

"I'm so glad I was born greedy," she said, sinking into a chair in a corner of the dining-room and beginning to attack the pile of strawberries wrested by Kavanagh from a passing waiter.

"You remember Voltaire's maxim: 'Soyez gourmand et gai.' Do you think that's the secret of happiness?" said Kavanagh.

"Yes, but Voltaire couldn't put his maxim into practice. He had a wretched digestion. Perhaps that was what made him so impious. Tell me, what did you really think of the Countess's lecture?"

"Well—er—frankly I thought it the most unmitigated bunkum."

"Of course."

"Ah, you thought so too? Then I wonder why you came to hear her?"

"I came because Aunt Sarah—Mrs. Schutzheim, you know, insisted on bringing me. She's one of her coadjutors. And after all, I've been amused."

"You don't believe in the Countess's soul being transported into the Gobi Desert?"

"Of course not. But then, you see, I don't believe

in souls at all. I'm a complete materialist."

Kavanagh was conscious of a slight jar. Myra perceived this immediately and added :

" Have I shocked you ? "

" No, not exactly. But——"

" But what ? "

" Well, I was thinking of what Napoleon said about a materialist—' What can I have in common with a man who says he is a lump of mud ? ' "

" Say clay then ; it sounds nicer. After all, that's what the Bible says : ' Clay you are and to clay you shall return.' I'd rather that than go on being re-incarnated as the Countess describes—something like being an old umbrella re-covered and re-covered. I'm sure the spokes aren't worth it." Then dropping her tone of light banter she went on : " All the same, I'm interested in Countess Zapraksy. She has certain powers."

" You think so ? "

" Yes, she understands something of what is popularly called the influence of mind over matter—an absurd expression really, because mind is matter, only matter of a different kind to the body. Both are equally worked by natural laws, only we haven't yet learnt much about them. The Countess has, I believe. But it isn't through the ' New Psychism ' that she does her most important work—that's only camouflage for the rank and file."

" How does she work then ? "

Myra sank her voice to a whisper. " Have you never heard of the Order of the Phoenix ? "

" What do you know about it ? " said Kavanagh, evading the question.

" No, well, don't say I mentioned it to you, for it's

a secret society, but that's the real hub of Countess Zapraksy's activities—she's one of the Ruling Chiefs. And Aunt Sarah is another. It sometimes holds meetings at the Olympian Club, which goes in specially for that sort of thing."

"And are you a member?"

"Heavens, no! They tried to rope me in, though, so that's how I've heard about it. But you won't breathe a word to anyone, will you? I only told you because you seem interested in this sort of thing."

"Indeed I am. I should like to hear more."

"Well, come and dine one evening and we'll have another talk. And I'd like you to meet Father."

"I should be delighted."

"Good. Now I must be going. I see Aunt Sarah beckoning. We've got to go on to the 'At Home' at 10 Downing Street." And with a radiant smile Myra vanished.

The merely curious amongst the crowd were now drifting towards the door, but an admiring circle still remained around the Countess. Kavanagh as he approached could hear them repeating rapturously to each other:

"Isn't she marvellous?"—"Yes, my dear, too wonderful!"

"Marvellous, wonderful!" said Kavanagh to himself; "but they never say what her marvel or wonder consists in. I don't believe they know themselves."

Then Mrs. Murray Bateman could be heard saying:

"We must give a ball in the autumn in aid of 'Nirvana'"—a proposal that met with rapturous applause. After that a fresh chorus arose:

"Dear Countess, do say you will!" and Lady

Caroline Wentlock's voice rose above the rest saying :

" Yes, indeed we *must* have a portrait of our Teacher for the Olympian Club. Mrs. Bateman, do try and persuade her ! "

The Countess made a modest gesture as if to say she was unworthy of this honour, but her hostess eagerly took up the tale, exclaiming : " Yes, Countess, do consent. We long to have a picture of you to preside over our meetings when you have left us ! "

" Well, if you wish it ! " said the Countess with a shrug.

A chorus of satisfaction greeted this concession :

" Who shall we get to do it ? "—" Grindell Smith ? "—" Razenko ? "—" Mollinari ? "—" What about Captain Brandon ? "—" Oh, of course, Brandon would be the best, but he's so booked up ! "—" Yes, and so difficult to get. If only we could persuade him ! "

Everyone seemed to agree on this point.

" If only Captain Brandon would do it ! "—" Does anybody here know him ? "

Kavanagh saw his opportunity and seized it :

" I know Brandon well. I think I could persuade him, if you wish it, to undertake the Countess's portrait."

Everyone turned appreciatively in his direction. Countess Zapraksy herself now smiled graciously and said :

" Ah ? So ? I shall be pleased to sit to Captain Brandon. But the picture cannot be made here. To-morrow I return to my villa at Bogazzo. Do you think Captain Brandon would consent to come and paint me there ? It would be better in my own atmosphere. Here the air is too full of disturbing influences."

" I can certainly ask him," said Kavanagh, anxious

not to appear too eager. Brandon, he knew, would jump at the suggestion ; painting a portrait, he had often said, offered the best opportunity for finding out more about a person in whom he was interested ; " especially when they get tired," he would say, " they are apt to talk less guardedly." And Italy was the place he liked most for a holiday.

Kavanagh departed amongst a chorus of thanks, and made straight for Brandon's studio.

" Well, the afternoon has not been unfruitful," he said to his friend, who was busy cleaning up his palette ; " I'm now quite *persona grata* in the Countess's circle, and they want you to paint her portrait."

Jimmy gave a low whistle. " Good. You've managed splendidly, Terence. When are we to begin ? "

" You'll have to go to Bogazzo ; she is leaving England to-morrow, and says she must be painted in her own atmosphere."

" Better and better. Bogazzo is the one spot I should like to visit."

" Ah, then you know all about it."

" No, that's the worst of it. I don't know all about it—only that in some way it seems to be a focus for Bolshevik activities."

" Good Lord, but the Countess was eloquent in her denunciation of Bolshevism this afternoon ! "

" Very likely. She depends, as you know, for a good deal of her support on the Conservative Party. Anti-Bolshevism is the best window-dressing she can provide. Denouncing Bolshevism does the Bolsheviks no harm—provided that one doesn't hint that there's anything behind it. A lot of their best agents are in that line of business."

" Do you think Countess Zapraksy works through the

Order of the Phoenix ? ” and Kavanagh related what Myra had told him on the subject.

Brandon listened attentively.

“ Very interesting,” he said at last, “ you’ve done a good day’s work, Terence. But I don’t think the Order of the Phoenix is consciously Bolshevistic. Being part of the occult side of the show, it is more or less cut off from the political movement. But it acts as a sort of training ground where likely subjects can be chosen for indoctrination into more definitely destructive ideas. The danger spot there is Doctor Hensley.”

“ Ah, he was at the meeting this afternoon.”

“ He would be. Doctor Hensley,” Brandon went on after a pause, “ is a real initiate—one of the Twenty-Five and very near the Zodiac. As a powerful hypnotist he exercises an immense influence over the minds of the undergraduates—a positively devastating influence. That’s a man to watch, Terence.”

“ I’ll cultivate his acquaintance. And what about dining with the Greenworthys ? ”

“ Oh, go by all means. I’m interested in that old man. In fact, I shouldn’t be surprised if he were actually a member of the Zodiac. He’s certainly one of the twelve richest men in the world, and with his international connections he might well be exercising a powerful influence on the economic situation of the world.”

Mrs. Murray Bateman lost no time in ringing Kavanagh up about the Countess’s portrait, and was overjoyed to hear that Captain Brandon had agreed to undertake it. All arrangements were quickly made. It was now the end of July ; in a fortnight’s time

Brandon would start for Bogazzo, and Kavanagh would go with him to enjoy the scenery and the society at the Villa Pax Mundi. As the Villa was small and they would be together, it was decided that they should stay at the inn in the village and Brandon would go daily to paint the Countess in her garden. It was a charming prospect and one that offered interesting possibilities.

Myra Greenworthy meanwhile did not forget her promised invitation to dine, and one evening a week later Kavanagh alighted from a taxi at the door of the millionaire's magnificent mansion in Kensington Palace Gardens. About a dozen guests were already assembled in the vast drawing-room, where Myra, looking really beautiful in an orange-coloured gown and a long rope of marvellous pearls, was doing the honours with her usual animation. She greeted Kavanagh with a radiant smile and, under cover of the buzz of conversation, said in an undertone :

"If only Father hadn't insisted on having all this crowd! I shan't be able to sit next to you at dinner, I've got to be taken in by Lord Mendlestone, but we'll have a talk afterwards. Father, this is Major Kavanagh," she went on, going up to a short thick-set man who stood a few paces away shaking hands with fresh arrivals.

"Glad to welcome you, Major Kavanagh," he said with a slight German accent. "My daughter tells me you are going into Parliament."

"I hope to."

Did a derisive smile cross Sir Paul's dark features? Kavanagh could hardly tell. But he took an instant dislike to him. The heavy nose turning down towards

the rather thick lips, the lower of which protruded slightly, giving a bitter and sneering expression to the whole face, the hard eyes looking out from beneath beetling brows, as if estimating one's value and setting it at a very low figure—all combined to convey a far from pleasing impression.

"Sinister," Kavanagh said to himself. Yes, that was the word for it. But as he watched him turning to other guests he realised that the contemptuous expression which had so repelled him was not reserved for himself, Kavanagh, alone ; it was directed on everyone in turn and seemed to be the form into which his face had set. Throughout dinner it never changed, even when he smiled. For whilst seated at the head of the table playing his part as the genial host, his mouth widened frequently into smiles, but the bitterness still lingered round the corners.

Kavanagh, bored between two neighbours—one who talked to him of all the Grand Hotels she had visited on the Continent, the other of the gaieties she was enjoying through the London season—had leisure to study his fellow-guests. Looking round the table he noticed that most of them had a certain family resemblance. Asiatics, he said to himself, and though the fact inspired him with no antagonism, for he was entirely free from racial prejudices, he was still fresh enough from India to feel that "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." The mistake these people made was to try to occidentalise themselves. After all, he reflected, it's really our Western clothes that handicap and vulgarise them. All Orientals—Chinese, Japanese, Indian or whatever they may be—appear at a disadvantage when they adopt our way of dressing. Once back in their native dress

they'd lose at once that sort of common air that makes us smile. Put the massive middle-aged woman opposite into Eastern robes, with jewels glittering on her forehead, and she'd be marvellously picturesque, whilst Greenworthy himself, who in his black dress suit looked ill at ease, would appear almost handsome and dignified clothed like a Hebrew prophet of the Sunday picture-books. Only Isidore Franklin, sitting opposite him, Kavanagh could not visualise under a pleasing aspect; he alone, in black coat or kaftan, in top hat or in tarboosh must be equally repellent. Kavanagh had never felt so strong a feeling of aversion towards any human being.

After dinner, when the men joined the women in the drawing-room, the party broke up into little groups, and Kavanagh, feeling rather out of it amongst these people who all seemed somehow related to each other, walked to the open French window and looked out at the garden grimly adorned with grey statues and clumps of speckled laurels. Suddenly he felt a light touch on his coat sleeve. It was Myra looking up into his face with a gleam in her dark eyes.

"Come out into the garden," she said softly, "they're all busy talking. We shan't be missed."

And she led the way through the window, a subtle and delicious perfume floating in her wake.

They made their way towards a summer-house and sat down upon a stone seat.

"Tell me what you thought of the dinner," said Myra.

"I thought it excellent," Kavanagh answered heartily; "you have a first-rate *chef*."

"I didn't mean the food," Myra said with a laugh, "but the people. Not very exhilarating, were they?"

" Oh, I liked them. They seemed so—so—well, so satisfied." He couldn't think of any other word.

" No doubt they were. You see, they were eating. But, be frank now, you didn't like Izzy ! "

" Izzy ? "

" Isidore Franklin. He's always called Izzy. And you can't bear him, you know ! "

" Why should you think so ? " said Kavanagh, hedging.

" Oh, I saw it in your eyes. Besides, no one could really like him."

" Need we talk of Izzy ? Surely there are pleasanter topics of conversation."

" Ah, but I've got to think of him ! You see——" she paused and added abruptly : " Well, they want me to marry him."

" Good Lord ! " There was genuine concern in Kavanagh's voice. It seemed to him horrible that this young and, yes, charming girl, should be destined to be the wife of " that little reptile," as Kavanagh mentally designated him. " But who are ' they ' ? " he asked.

" Oh, his father and, I suppose, mine. Oscar Franklin's very keen about it, and though Father doesn't like Izzy it would be difficult for him to go against him."

" Why difficult if he doesn't like the fellow ? "

" Well, Oscar Franklin is one of the richest and most influential financiers in the world, and as Father has no heir, the idea is to unite the two fortunes. Of course Izzy is considered a very brilliant *parti*."

" But you wouldn't like it a bit, would you, Myra ? " said Kavanagh, unable to check the note of affectionate sympathy that inevitably crept into his voice when he was confronted by a woman in distress. But he was

quite unprepared for Myra slipping her hand into his and murmuring as she looked up into his eyes :

" Oh, Terence, what do you think ? "

Kavanagh felt horribly embarrassed. There was no mistaking Myra's meaning. Her glossy black head was so close that it almost rested on his shoulder, and that strange seductive scent rose to his nostrils—six months ago he might have had difficulty in keeping his head under these circumstances. But the thought of Rosamund steadied him. Besides, if he had the Irishman's susceptibility to feminine charms, he had also the Irishman's ready wit. So, quickly recovering his presence of mind, he patted her hand with his free one whilst releasing the one she had imprisoned and said cheerfully :

" Of course I think you mustn't dream of marrying him—if you don't like the fellow. And he certainly isn't nearly good enough. You must wait until you meet the right man, Myra," he added in a fatherly tone.

" But I *have* met him ! " wailed Myra ; the next moment she had flung herself into his arms, whilst her slender body was shaken with sobs.

" Hush, Myra, you mustn't give way like this ! " said Kavanagh, gently disengaging himself and rising to his feet. " Someone may be listening. I'm sure I heard a sound in the bushes."

Myra stopped in the middle of a sob and held her breath. " Yes, there is someone," she whispered, and suddenly breaking away from Kavanagh she darted to the front of the summer-house and peeped out. But nothing was to be seen.

The distraction, however, had provided a way out of a very awkward situation. Kavanagh now led the way firmly back to the house, continuing to talk in the

same fatherly tone he had adopted before Myra's outburst.

"You must take a pull, keep a tight hold on yourself. You're still so young, and you've got life before you—life and happiness—lots of happiness."

Myra looked up at him through her tears and answered nothing. In this way they reached the drawing-room safely and found the party breaking up. Myra, controlling herself admirably, shook hands with the departing guests, and Kavanagh, having also taken his leave, strolled out to the open front door. It was too fine a night, he felt, to be boxed up in a taxi, so he decided to walk back to his rooms and set off along the road to Kensington High Street. Looking up at the stars, he breathed a deep sigh of relief. It had been a "very near thing" this evening, but he had really got out of it rather neatly—that bird in the bushes was a marvellous bit of luck. But what a waste it all seemed! Some fellows would have been only too thankful for a colossal heiress to fling herself into their arms! Why couldn't he have been a penniless subaltern and not in love with Rosamund? Myra was really very sweet, her dark eyes wet with tears and her white shoulders quivering. . . .

But suddenly the sound of a motor approaching from behind roused him from his reflections, and as he stepped aside on to the footpath, the car—a small Bentley—suddenly swerved in his direction. He had only time to skip agilely behind a lamppost before it had rushed past him with the roar of an open exhaust.

"What an extraordinary bit of driving!" he said to himself. "The fellow inside must be drunk!" Yet the Bentley was now pursuing a perfectly straight though rapid course, and cleared the gate-post into the

High Street with well-timed accuracy. Well, this seemed to be an evening of narrow shaves for him, and he was lucky to have escaped so successfully. The unfortunate part of the whole affair was that he would have to see less of Myra in future, and Brandon had counted on his visits to the house in Kensington Palace Gardens to follow up certain clues. The old man was certainly worth watching, still more was Izzy, and where else was the little reptile to be met? And how was he to explain the situation to Jimmy? For even to one's best friend one could not give away a woman. But he consoled himself with the thought that they would soon be starting for Bogazzo, and for a time the Greenworthy *ménage* need not occupy their attention.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VILLA PAX MUNDI

EARLY in August a party of five set forth for Bogazzo. Rosamund, who always took charge of her mother during the summer months they spent out of London, had no difficulty in persuading her to visit that delightful spot. To her gentle worldly soul Rosamund's absorption in her work for Kavanagh was immensely gratifying and could signify only one thing—this young man with the charming manners and "a place in the country" had succeeded in rousing her daughter from her usual languor to the keenest enthusiasm, and now she actually wanted to follow him to Italy! Naturally Lady Dare was ready, as Kavanagh would have expressed it, "to go lepping."

The fifth member of the party was Rigby, Brandon's faithful servant, without whom he never undertook a Continental expedition, for Rigby could easily pass as a Frenchman, and had made a fine art of dropping into cafés or *buvettes* and engaging people in conversation on points of interest.

Before starting, Brandon made a careful assortment of his papers, picking out any that were likely to be useful—dossiers and photographs of people and of course the rituals supplied by Rosamund—to be packed in a despatch-case and carried by Rigby.

Bogazzo, which they reached in the freshness of early morning, proved to be even more enchanting than they had pictured it, a small village just on the

Italian side of the Swiss frontier, lying at the edge of a clear blue lake surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Brandon and Kavanagh put up at an old hotel on the borders of the forest, and Rosamund and her mother at a more modern one overlooking the lake. This arrangement had been decided on so that Rosamund should not be associated with the two men, helping them only in the background ; besides, it was highly probable that members of the Order of the Phoenix might turn up at the Villa Pax Mundi, and once introduced to that circle she would be liable to come up against them. She had no wish to get once more into their atmosphere.

The same afternoon Brandon and Kavanagh set off on a visit to the Countess Zapraksy.

The Villa Pax Mundi, perched on the slope of the hill amidst the vineyards, certainly lived up to its name with its sunny terraces and pergolas of climbing roses. The Countess clothed in an embroidered garment of russet silk reminiscent of an Egyptian fresco, received the new arrivals warmly, and introduced them to the rest of the party—the Dean of Barminster and his wife, Mervyn O'Neil the Irish poet, and Frau Schnorrer, a middle-aged German of ample proportions who, as the Countess explained, had been President of the Women's Section of the Prussian "Return to Nature Movement" until its suppression by Hitler, and who appeared to be attired only in a bath-sheet kept together perilously by a large brooch on one shoulder.

"Dear Frau Schnorrer," the Countess observed to Brandon as they wandered together round the garden, "she is a most remarkable woman. Out of deference to certain prejudices she does not appear in public in a complete state of nature, but of course during the

earlier part of the day we encourage her to follow the system she has found so health-giving."

"And to wear nothing at all?"

"Precisely. I always like my guests to do exactly as they please. Inhibitions are all deleterious to health. You will do just as you like whilst you are here, I hope."

"Thanks awfully. But I think I'll keep my clothes on. And I notice you prefer to do the same?"

"Yes, I have not yet felt the urge to cast off all clothing. The climate perhaps is hardly warm enough. Now, what would you suggest I should wear for my portrait?"

"Well, I think some striking colour . . . purple, I think . . . yes, decidedly a purple robe if you have one."

"Good. I see you have perception. That is the colour that best expresses my aura."

The next morning Brandon set to work. The Countess, enthroned on an old Italian seat at the end of the terrace with sprays of scarlet begonias and pale mauve plumbago framing her head, really made a most striking model, and but for her habit of suddenly dropping off to sleep would have been a first-rate sitter.

"If you could manage to keep awake for about five minutes now," Brandon found himself repeating, but the Countess explained that, owing to her practice of detaching herself from the physical plane, she was apt to float away on to the astral at any moment. Sometimes indeed she remained there so long and presented so odd an appearance with her eyes tightly shut and her mouth half open, that Brandon would put up his brushes and wander away to a shady corner of the

garden to enjoy a cigarette with Kavanagh until a cry from the Countess announced that her soul had once more returned to earth. At this rate the portrait would take some time to finish, but what matter? In this land of *dolce far niente* time was of no account, and the longer they stayed at Bogazzo the more they would be likely to discover about what went on there.

At first nothing of particular interest occurred. The Countess's guests, who succeeded each other at intervals of a few days, seemed, with the exception of Lady Caroline Wentlock, unconcerned with politics of any kind and no connection with secret societies could be detected. Most of them were followers of various odd cults: there was Edmond Vallergues, the well-known author of mystic novels, which it was said he was able to write only under the influence of haschisch; Imogen Meldreth, the American actress, who believed herself to be the reincarnation of Semiramis, and insisted on bringing with her a pet leopard named Ptolemy that smelt abominably and filled Lady Caroline with nervous apprehension for the fate of her cherished Peke. Then there was Heinrich Angstrom, the Austrian playwright, and Eugene Bramber, the editor of the *Scrutator*, who studied Yoga, which necessitated standing on his head for half an hour every morning—a process which he declared he found marvellously clearing to the brain. And in the background there flitted from time to time the silent figure of the Countess's secretary, Miss McNab, a pale Scotch girl with sandy hair whose presence could usually be heard, rather than seen, by the click of a typewriter in a small room off the hall.

When, as sometimes happened, Brandon and Kavanagh remained to meals at the Villa, the conversa-

tion usually turned to literature, art, or the peculiar philosophies of those present. On the rare occasions when public affairs were mentioned, the attitude of the party seemed to be that of superior tolerance towards the foolish people who chose to wear themselves out over such mundane questions as frontiers, tariffs, national defence, and so on; once the New Psychism had been universally accepted, all national and international problems would be settled automatically, and the world would enter on the millennium which only human errors prevented it from enjoying at the present time. Meanwhile one need not bother one's head about these things. The only topic that seemed to excite some passion was Fascism, which was evidently abhorrent to the whole company. Extraordinary incidents were constantly reported as having occurred close by, and as Brandon kept discreetly to his rôle of portrait painter, Kavanagh was left alone to defend Mussolini against the succeeding barbarities attributed to him.

"Yes, I assure you, my dear," one lady observed impressively, "it is positively dangerous to mention his name anywhere in public—one is liable to be thrown into prison immediately. A friend of mine went to buy some muslin for mosquito-nets, and asked for 'mussolina' in a shop, and everyone looked furious, thinking she was referring to the Duce. And she was shadowed by the police for days afterwards!"

"Oh, the terror in Italy is just as great as in Russia!" said an Italian journalist. "One lives in constant fear of listening ears—it is like being under the Cheka!"

"Yet," Kavanagh could not help interposing, "you are not afraid to speak your mind here and you

yourself live in Rome. How many Russians could talk in this way in the provinces, especially if they were going back to Moscow? Have you no fear of being reported?"

To this enquiry, however, the journalist remained conveniently deaf.

Kavanagh found himself wondering what Alessandro, the Countess's Italian manservant, thought as he handed the dishes during these conversations. But perhaps he did not understand English or was hostile to Fascism. At any rate, his dark impassive countenance showed no signs of either approval or resentment.

Much was of course heard at the Villa of "Nirvana," the clinic about which the Countess had spoken during her lecture in London, and before Brandon and Kavanagh had been three days in Bogazzo, she insisted on taking them to visit that remarkable institution. It was an unpretentious building of what would be called in England the "cottage hospital" type, situated in the heart of the forest at a considerable distance from the nearest village or from any other human habitation. The surrounding garden with its sparse lawns and newly planted flower-beds had evidently not long been reclaimed from the encircling woodland. The house itself was built after the most modern hygienic fashion with wide balconies divided by partitions, and at one end a covered *liege-halle* where several patients could be seen lying on *chaises longues*, "A charming spot, don't you think so?" said Countess Zapraksy as they descended from the car and rang the bell at the gate.

"Yes, delightful and so restful!" both agreed but Brandon added: "Rather shut in by trees, though, isn't it? In wet weather——"

"That is just the charm of it!" cried the Countess. "The aroma of the forest is so health-giving! The very thing the patients need in order to purify their lungs after breathing the air of cities. Ah! here comes the doctor himself to receive us!" and she turned to greet a man with a short pointed beard dressed in a white linen overall who came forward from the entrance.

"Welcome, dear Contessa!" he said, kissing the Countess's hand.

"I have brought two guests with me from England to visit your wonderful clinic," she said, introducing Brandon and Kavanagh, to whom she added: "We are fortunate in finding Doctor Weingold himself here to-day. His work calls him to so many other places that he is only able to spend part of his time at the clinic—he comes for a few days, and is then obliged to go on elsewhere to attend to patients all over Europe. There is no one else, you see, who possesses his marvellous knowledge!"

The doctor made a modest gesture of disclaimer.

"Still, I have an admirable *remplaçant*—and our matron, la Sœur Célestine, is unrivalled in her care of the sick. She will come herself to receive you."

Sœur Célestine, a largely built woman of about forty, with an olive skin and crisp black hair, was not long in making her appearance, and led the visitors into the salon—a room furnished with Spartan simplicity—where she proceeded to tell them of the marvellous cures effected by osteopathic and electric treatment.

"Would it be possible to see the room where this is carried out?" Brandon enquired.

"Unfortunately no. The doctor absolutely forbids any strangers entering those apartments—they are

liable to disturb the vibrations."

"I understand. You have not many patients at the moment?" Brandon went on in a tone of polite interest. Except in the *liege-halle* there had seemed to be nobody about.

"No," Sœur Célestine answered, looking at him sharply. "At this time of year we are never very busy. And in general we do not have a great number of patients. We are very particular whom we receive."

"Ah! And why is that?"

"Because the treatment we give is suited only to those who have reached a certain stage of spiritual development, and they are few in number. Those who remain on the purely physical plane can be attended in ordinary hospitals and clinics."

"Should I be admitted?" Kavanagh could not refrain from asking.

Sœur Célestine, glancing at his obviously robust physique, answered cautiously:

"That depends on what you are suffering from and on your spiritual condition. It is necessary before entering to pass certain tests." And then, evidently anxious to change the subject, she began to speak of the walks that might be taken in the mountains above the forest and the health-giving properties of the pine-laden air.

"It's all very queer," Kavanagh said after they had returned to the hotel that evening. "Why on earth do they have a clinic stuck right away in the forest? It must be very inconvenient to be cut off like that from communication with the outer world."

"I suppose they have a telephone. Still, there *is* something odd about it. We must get Rigby," Bran-

don went on, "to do some sleuth work in the neighbourhood. He knows enough Italian to pick up a good deal that's going on."

But Rigby had already been improving the shining hours by drinking at cafés and listening to village gossip which sometimes touched on the clinic in the forest. "An odd sort of hospital," the villagers would say, "for sometimes it appears to be uninhabited, and when the doctor and nurses are there they go their way silently and speak of nothing to the tradespeople from whom they buy their supplies." The most tactful questioning could elicit nothing more definite. It seemed almost as if the inhabitants of Bogazzo were afraid to speak out on the matter.

One morning, however, Brandon, finding that he had left his cigarette-case at the Villa, sent Rigby up at an early hour to find it. He himself never arrived there with Kavanagh before eleven o'clock—no one, with the exception of Frau Schnorrer, left their rooms before that time. When Rigby returned with the cigarette-case it was evident that he had something to report :

"What is it, Rigby?" Brandon asked.

"Well, sir, there was a very odd sort of gentleman coming out of the gate as I went in."

"What was he like?"

"A dark sort of little fellow with a pointed black beard and wearing black spectacles, black alpaca coat, and a dirty Panama on his head. An ugly customer, I should say, sir."

"Was he carrying anything?"

"No, sir. Nothing but a stick. But I noticed that his pockets were bulging, and he kept a hand in one as if he was holding on to something."

"Did you note the time?"

"Yes, sir; nine thirty-five precisely."

"Good. It looks as if we'd got to be up at the Villa earlier in future. Meanwhile you'd better see if you can get on the track of the man somewhere in the village and find out who he is. After all, he may be only a harmless tradesman."

Rigby shook his head. "He's not that, sir. Came from the East of Europe, unless I'm very much mistaken. But I'll keep a look out for him."

The same day when Brandon and Kavanagh returned to the hotel for luncheon, Rigby padded into the room as was his wont when he had something of importance to communicate.

"Excuse me, sir, but the little feller I saw this morning coming out of the gate of the Villa is sitting in the café opposite."

"We'll drop in there for an *apéritif*, shall we Terence?" And the two men strolled across the street and took their places at a small marble-topped table.

"Two Vermouths," said Brandon, looking round him carelessly. Ah, that was evidently Rigby's man, seated at a table in the corner drinking *grappa*! Where had he seen that face before? Somehow those features seemed vaguely familiar. Ah, it was slowly coming to him—was it possible? Could this be Schwartzmann, the principal Bolshevik courier between Berlin and Moscow? Yes, it *was* Schwartzmann—there could be no doubt of that.

"We're on a hot scent, Terence," he said as he and Kavanagh made their way back to the hotel. "If Schwartzmann is employed for this work there must be something important on hand. He'll probably be off by the first train; it leaves at two-thirty, so we're not

likely to catch a glimpse of him again. But we must keep a watch on the Villa in case any other emissaries arrive."

It was evident that only the early bird would catch whatever worms frequented the Villa Pax Mundi; 9.30 appeared to be the most likely hour. Did they come for secret interviews with the Countess before her guests had left their rooms, or was there any other object for their visits? At any rate, Brandon and Kavanagh decided that they must be there to see. It might be difficult to explain their presence two hours before their usual hour for arrival, but Alessandro was the only person likely to be about at that time, and should he appear surprised they resolved to bluff it out by remarking that they had merely come to enjoy the freshness of the early hour in the garden. The Countess had repeatedly invited them to drop in at any moment they felt inclined, and Alessandro could hardly suspect them of any sinister intentions.

Accordingly the next morning they were up betimes and arrived at the Villa at 9.15 precisely. At one end of the verandah Alessandro in a striped cotton coat could be seen shaking out mats and arranging the chairs. "If you can, engage him in conversation," said Brandon. "I'll stroll round to the front door and see if anything is going on there."

But they had reckoned without Frau Schnorrer. On reaching the terrace they found to their consternation the President of the Women's Return to Nature Movement enjoying a sun-bath in a deck-chair on the pathway leading to the front door, in the exact garb with which she had entered the world. Without a trace of embarrassment she beckoned to them to approach and take places at her side. Kavanagh, too astonished to

refuse, accepted the proffered chair, whilst Brandon, remarking, "Excuse me, but I think I left my paint brushes in the hall!" vanished round the corner in the direction of the hall door.

"Coward, to leave me alone to face this situation!" Kavanagh said grimly to himself. How on earth was he to get through a *tête-à-tête* with a lady not wearing a stitch of clothing? However, he resolved to look straight in front of him and not once turn his head in the direction of his companion.

But Frau Schnorrer saved him the effort of breaking the ice.

"You gannot imagine, Commander Kavanagh," she remarked in guttural English, "whad beace one enchoys when one hass redurned to Nature—der ublift one exberiences as soon as one is gombletely ungllothed!"

"Well, I can't say I have ever felt that—in a Turkish bath, for example," Kavanagh answered.

"Ach, no, one must be oud in der oben air, amidst der vlowers and der drees! Denn one veels immediately dat one is a bart of Nature—a vonderful sensation! So bure! So elefating!"

"Still efen indoors," she continued after a pause, "once one hass really grasbed der inwardness of der mofement, der same sense of exhilaration bersists. At our dinner-barties in vinter, vat freedom of dought, vat shparkling gonversation! I wish I could bersuade you to join our Nudist golony on the Seine!"

"I wonder," said Kavanagh meditatively, "whether that's what the poor things feel in lunatic asylums——"

"How? Vot do you mean? In lunadic asylums?" said Frau Schnorrer indignantly.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I

was really thinking out loud. But, you see, in asylums I've been told that the lunatics' first impulse is to tear off all their clothes, and they have to be prevented from doing so by force. However, perhaps they've caught a glimpse of the truths you have discovered and ought not to be restrained."

"Of gourse dey ought nod do pe restrained," said Frau Schnorrer, somewhat pacified by Kavanagh's last remark. "One should nefer rebress Nature. Animals are happy pegause dey liff vree und undrammelled, aple to gife blay to all deir natural instincts. Dat is vot is so peautiful about dem—ach!" the sentence ended in a shriek.

Kavanagh started, and looking round for the first time in the direction of his Nature-clad companion, saw, beyond her quivering shoulder, the crouching form of Imogen's leopard preparing to spring.

In an instant Frau Schnorrer was out of her chair and tearing madly along the terrace uttering shrill cries like the siren of a yacht, whilst the leopard bounded after her in a series of long leaps, each of which brought him nearer to his prey. Kavanagh, checking his first impulse to burst into unseemly laughter at the amazing spectacle of the flying Rubens figure with the leopard at its heels, was preparing to start in pursuit, armed only with a walking-stick, when a clear voice rang out from the verandah: "Ptolemy, to heel!" It was Imogen Meldreth, who, with the other inhabitants of the Villa, had rushed out in their night clothes at the sound of Frau Schnorrer's screams. For an instant the leopard paused, but was evidently about to spring forward again when Countess Zapraksy suddenly emerged from a window and placed herself in its path.

"Halt!" she said briefly, with a wave of the hand that threw the leopard back on its haunches. Then, making a rapid pass before its eyes she seemed to hold it in motionless rigidity. The next moment the huge cat crept meekly back to its mistress on the verandah.

Meanwhile a hubbub had arisen there.

"I told you the animal was dangerous!" said Lady Caroline, who had followed in the wake of Imogen, clasping her Peke closer. "Now perhaps you will believe me!"

"Ptolemy is not dangerous!" Imogen retorted indignantly. "He is perfectly safe with people who have clothes on. But the sight of that mass of bare flesh would be enough to give ideas to any leopard." And she nodded in the direction of Frau Schnorrer's fainting form, which had collapsed at the end of the terrace and was now being carried into the house by Alessandro and the Irish poet. "Poor Ptolemy!" she added, stroking the leopard's head affectionately.

There was certainly something to be said for Ptolemy, reflected Kavanagh. The lady's opulent limbs might well have appeared tempting, and, after all, had she not herself declared that a wild animal should be allowed to follow its natural instincts? Would she be inclined to take the same view now? Well, if she wanted to go back to the jungle she had had a taste of it that morning.

Meanwhile Brandon had not been wasting his time, and as the two men walked back to the hotel for breakfast they compared notes on their respective adventures.

"I seem to have missed a thrilling sight," said

Brandon, when they had shouted themselves hoarse over Kavanagh's story. "And an interesting one too," he added. "The Countess's control over the leopard certainly suggests that she really has hypnotic powers. The cat tribe are peculiarly sensitive to such influences. But now I must tell you the result of my investigations. Under cover of the commotion—for I realised that there was something unusual going on—I was able to make certain observations. I think I've discovered the rôle of the Villa Pax Mundi."

"What is that?"

"It seems to be a house of call for correspondence. Lying on the hall table were a number of letters addressed to names which are certainly not those of people staying in the house. They're probably not real names. The contents are presumably too dangerous to send by post into countries where supervision is at all strict. I noticed that one or two were unstamped and must therefore have been left by hand. Evidently the same courier who fetches letters leaves them. If only we could get hold of some of them!"

"You didn't think of abstracting any when you had the chance?"

"Too dangerous. Any letter that had been removed would be missed at once. We don't want to rouse suspicions yet."

"I suppose the Countess must know all about it?"

"I don't see how she can fail to. The whole thing must be arranged with her. I wonder whether Alessandro's in the plot. We must get Rigby to cultivate his acquaintance."

But an incident that occurred a day or two later settled this question. Kavanagh and Brandon were sitting on the verandah after tea whilst the other

guests wandered away along the terrace. Only Alessandro remained, flicking the crumbs off the table with a napkin.

"Hullo, what's this?" said Kavanagh, picking up the *Corriere della Sera*, which had just arrived. "An attempt on the life of the Duce!"

"What?" cried Alessandro, dropping the napkin with a start—there was no mistaking the consternation on his face.

"Oh, it's all right!" smiled Kavanagh. "The attempt failed. The Duce is perfectly safe."

"God be thanked!" murmured the Italian.

"Ah! Then you are a Fascist, Alessandro?" said Kavanagh.

"Sicuro. What true Italian is not? But I do not say so in this house."

"But you can say it to me."

"I know," said Alessandro, with a gleam of his white teeth. "I have heard the Signore speak at meals of the Duce. I understand some English, you see. As for me," he added, with a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure he was not overheard, "I keep my ears open and my mouth shut. In that way one learns."

"You are here to learn, perhaps?" asked Brandon, and as the man made no reply he added to himself: "A Fascist agent evidently—this is excellent!"

"Listen, Alessandro," he went on in a low voice, speaking rapidly in Italian, "we are both friends. You can talk to us with perfect safety. And you notice strange things happening in—in this neighbourhood?"

"Very strange," Alessandro answered cryptically.

"Perhaps you can tell us something about them?"

"Perhaps. When no one is near. Every evening at ten o'clock I go down to post the letters. At the Gate of the Villa it is quiet. If the Signori were to walk in that direction——" Then seeing the rest of the party approaching, he went on loudly in a cheerful tone: "Yes, truly, the scenery in this part of Italy is superb; far superior to that of the Riviera."

"It looks to me as if Alessandro was our man," Kavanagh said to Brandon as the two made their way back to the hotel.

"Yes, he may be uncommonly useful. But we must be careful not to be seen speaking to him at the Villa. And it would be dangerous for him to come to our hotel. The village is probably full of anti-Fascist spies and his movements would be watched. I think we'll take a stroll after dinner this evening. Rigby can keep guard on the road outside."

It was a fine moonlight night when the two men, followed at a short distance by Rigby, slipped in at the gate of the Villa and took up their stand in the shade of some dark cypress trees to await the arrival of Alessandro. The Italian was not long in making his appearance, and spotting the Englishmen immediately tiptoed up to them with a finger on his lips and said in a whisper:

"We must be careful. Sometimes they are about at this hour. One never knows."

"Who are *they*, Alessandro?"

"The people who call for letters. Usually they come in the morning, but sometimes also at night. But perhaps for days they do not come at all."

"There was one two days ago, is that not so?"

"Yes, the Signore in black spectacles with the dirty hat. A rat of Moscow! Che mascalzone!" and

Alessandro spat energetically into the bushes. "He told the German Signora that he would be back here on the fourteenth. If only our people could get hold of him, they would settle him very quickly! They know how to do things!"

"Ah! then it was Schwartzmann!" thought Brandon.

"Now tell me, Alessandro," he began aloud, then broke off suddenly, turning to Kavanagh. "Isn't that Rigby whistling 'La donna e mobile' at the gate? A danger signal!"

The three men had only just time to step farther back into the shadows when the gate of the Villa clicked open and a woman entered with a valise in her hand. In the light of the moon her dark eyes and Slavonic features could be clearly seen.

"The typical revolutionary female that used to throw bombs in the good old days," murmured Brandon when she had passed out of hearing.

"She will return quickly," said Alessandro; "she has only come for the letters." And sure enough in five minutes the same figure passed out of the gate again.

"I wonder where she's going?" said Kavanagh.

"There!" answered Alessandro, nodding his head in the direction of the frontier. "They always go that way."

"Into Switzerland? Follow her, Alessandro, for a few moments, and see what road she takes."

Alessandro needed no urging, and was out in the road like lightning and following the now distant figure of the messenger with stealthy footsteps. For a quarter of an hour the two men waited at the gate until Alessandro returned heated and breathless.

"I could not go a long way," he explained, "for I

must be back at the Villa, but I followed her as far as the turning into the forest. There she disappeared from sight."

"Where could she be going to in the forest?" said Brandon meditatively. "The pathway leads to nowhere except—except, ah! the clinic 'Nirvana'!"

"Yes, that accursed house!" said Alessandro.

"You think that—why?"

But Alessandro would say no more than the inhabitants of Bogazzo—strange things went on there, what he either did not know or would not say.

"But why should messengers secretly take letters from the Villa to the Clinic?" asked Kavanagh.

"For the simple reason," answered Brandon, "that the frontier runs through the forest, and couriers between Italy and Switzerland get them across that way. The Clinic is evidently their house of call on that side, the Villa on this. I wish," he went on, "we could get at the contents of these letters. Have you ever had a look at them, Alessandro?"

"Only at the envelopes. I have noted the names sometimes."

"And they are probably not real ones. Have you never opened them?"

"How should I do that?"

Alessandro was evidently not an expert in these matters.

"Listen," said Brandon, "would you like to hand some of them over to us?"

"But, Signore, they would be missed."

"What time are they called for in the morning?"

"At half-past nine. Never before a quarter-past, at any rate."

"And they are left the day before?"

"Yes. The Signora who has just departed has probably left some now. But the Contessa goes to bed very late, sometimes not till after midnight. They cannot be removed till she has retired."

"Good. Then bring them down early in the morning, not later than seven o'clock, and place them here in this hole in the wall," said Brandon, removing a loose stone in the masonry; "replace the stone and then come back at nine o'clock and you will find them there safe."

"And without the appearance of having been opened?" Alessandro enquired anxiously.

"Without the appearance of having been touched. Is that understood, Alessandro?"

"It is understood, Signore, the letters will be there." And Alessandro departed with the Fascist salute which was answered in the same manner by the two Englishmen.

It was arranged that early in the morning Rigby should visit the *cache* in the Villa wall and bring the contents back to his master. Accordingly at 7.45 a.m., the trusted batman duly arrived with a packet of some half-dozen unstamped letters and several newspapers in wrappers bearing the stamps of different countries, including Germany and Russia.

"What a rum collection!" said Kavanagh.

It was certainly a strange assortment—envelopes addressed, some in type, some in various foreign hand-writings, to "Herr Otto Schmidt," "Ivan Levinsky," "Madame Rosalie Dupont," etc., at the Villa Pax Mundi.

"Evidently cover names used for correspondence," said Brandon, for none were known to him or were those of people staying at the Villa. "Now we must

hurry up. The sooner they're returned to their place the less chance there is of their little trip down to the gate of the Villa being discovered. Get out the camera, Rigby, whilst I start on the envelopes."

The three men worked swiftly and quietly. The flaps of the envelopes were deftly raised, and seals were sliced under with a hot palette knife so that no trace of their having been tampered with could be detected. Then the contents of each were taken out and those of which it seemed advisable to keep copies quickly photographed. It was a matter of half an hour to go through the whole collection. Then the letters were carefully replaced in the envelopes, the flaps fastened down again, and the package handed back to Rigby. A quarter of an hour later the letters were once more reposing peacefully on the hall-table at the Villa.

The first lot yielded nothing of particular interest, but the same process was repeated at intervals of a day or two for nearly a fortnight, by the end of which time Brandon, with the aid of Rosamund, had been able to pick up the threads of the whole correspondence. From this it was evident that Brandon had been right in his surmise that the letters were passing between the two houses of call—the Villa on the Italian and the Clinic on the Swiss side of the frontier.

Rosamund's experiences in occult groups had proved invaluable to Brandon, who had hitherto occupied himself mainly with the political side of the revolutionary movement. In this correspondence the two lines could be clearly followed—the political concerning itself with the organisation of Communism and the occult working through Masonic, Theosophical, or Rosicrucian groups for moral and intellectual subversion.

"You'll notice," observed Brandon, "that the two

sections employ a slightly different phraseology, but each really means the same. For example, both make use of classical pseudonyms, but whilst in the political movement these take the form of one proper name—Damocles, Cerberus, and so on—in the occult movement they form phrases like those in the list of members amongst Rosamund's papers—'Fiat Lux,' 'Potens inter Potentes,' etc."

"Yes," said Rosamund, "and whilst in the occult groups they always speak of 'the Great Work,' the political revolutionaries refer to 'the Great Day.' Both evidently mean the same thing viewed from their respective angles."

"Which is——?" asked Kavanagh.

"The collapse of our present civilisation," answered Brandon.

"I'm inclined to think, though," Rosamund said thoughtfully, "that sometimes the two lines overlap. I feel sure that some of the higher initiates of the occult groups are consciously working for political revolution."

"Ah!" said Brandon. "Then that would account for the fact that some of these people seem to have two or three pseudonyms. Evidently these are used according to which group is in question—the single name being the one they bear in revolutionary circles and the phrases those by which they are known in occult groups. 'Fiat Lux,' for example, seems to be identical with Damocles in the inner ring of revolutionaries, whilst Frau Schnorrer's *alias* 'Sola in Sole'—a good name for her that!—is evidently also Ariadne. But the most interesting point is the identity of the doctor at the Clinic—Doctor Weingold—who is referred to variously as Catiline and 'Omnia possumus.' I always suspected that Weingold was an assumed name, and

he struck me as a man with highly developed hypnotic powers. Did you notice his eyes ? ”

“ Yes, and the odd way he kept them fixed on us,” said Kavanagh.

“ Well, listen to this,” and Brandon pointed to a passage in one of the letters. “ ‘ Catiline must return immediately to Thebes ’—do you remember hearing the Countess say the doctor was called away on the fourteenth to Paris ? Now here is a post card, dated the seventeenth, saying simply : ‘ O.P. has arrived safely.’ But the postmark is Charenton. Doesn’t that remind you of anything ? ”

“ Ah yes, of Raskoff, about whom I told you once,” said Rosamund breathlessly. “ You think the doctor went to see Raskoff ? ”

“ I’m rather inclined to think the doctor *is* Raskoff. What do you say to taking a stroll round the Clinic on the chance of getting a glimpse of him and seeing if you recognise him ? It would be easy to keep a look-out without being seen—the forest comes right up to the edge of the garden.”

Rosamund eagerly agreed. As long as she did not have to get in touch with these people she was only too ready to help in sleuth work. So that afternoon the three made their way through the forest, and stationing themselves behind a clump of thick bushes on the edge of the garden awaited events.

They had chosen four o’clock as the hour when food was likely to be served to the patients in the *liege-halle* and the doctor might be expected to take a moment’s relaxation. Sure enough, before long, two white-coated figures could be seen emerging from the verandah and lighting cigarettes as they sauntered along the garden path.

"Weingold and his assistant, I suppose," whispered Brandon—"the *remplaçant* of whom he told us, no doubt. What is it, Rosamund? Do you recognise Raskoff?"

For Rosamund had clutched Brandon sharply by the arm.

"Yes, that's Raskoff all right. But the other man——"

"Well, what about him?"

"Gustav Mervine!" Rosamund said with bated breath. "Yes, I'm certain it's Mervine!"

Brandon gave a low whistle. "Of course, Mervine the Satanist! I ought to have recognised him from my photographs. Come on, we've seen enough. We'd better creep away quietly."

Once out of earshot, Kavanagh said:

"What's the excitement, Jimmy? Is Mervine of so much importance?"

"No, not of great importance in himself. He's really only a sort of vulgar black magician. But the queer thing is to find him here masquerading as a doctor. I wonder what on earth he's up to!"

"It looks more than ever as if there's something *louche* about the clinic."

"Yes. And I'd like to get at the real identity of Sœur Célestine. I feel somehow I know that face. . . . Hullo! I've had an idea! Wait till we get back to the hotel."

Arrived there, Brandon opened his despatch-box and took out a bundle of photographs. From amongst these he drew a small snapshot of a woman in a Russian fur-cap. Underneath something was written in Russian.

"What does that mean?" asked Kavanagh.

"Krovavaya Katya—Bloody Catherine—of the Cheka or Russian Secret Police now known as the Ogpu or the G.P.U. She's the woman who used to amuse herself by holding a lighted cigarette against the eyes of victims. Do you recognise her, Terence?"

"Yes. Without a doubt—Sœur Célestine. What the hell's she doing here?"

"That's what remains to be discovered. And what's the real purpose of the clinic? That's what I'd give a good deal to know."

CHAPTER IX

WITHIN THE TEMPLE

THERE was a new guest at the Villa when Brandon arrived next morning to finish the Countess's portrait. It was unusually hot, and Kavanagh had gone off with Rosamund to bathe in the lake, so Brandon made his way alone up the steep garden path to the terrace. There in the shade of large yellow beach umbrellas the house-party had assembled in an admiring group around a good-looking man of about forty who, seated at the head of the circle, was evidently engaged in delivering a discourse.

Drawing nearer, Brandon could hear him saying in an impressive tone :

" Wars will become impossible when men refuse to fight——" a remark which was greeted with a chorus of approval.

" Ah, Captain Brandon, I must introduce you to Doctor Hensley ! " the Countess said, rising and leading Brandon up to the speaker, who, without moving from his chair, bowed graciously.

So this was Dr. Hensley, the Fellow of St. Stephen's ! Taking his place in the circle, Brandon studied the calm, clean-shaven face of the man of whose " occult " powers Rosamund had spoken.

" Dr. Hensley was just saying," the Countess explained, " that wars will cease when men refuse to fight."

" No doubt. That—er—seems fairly obvious,

doesn't it ? " Brandon answered.

Dr. Hensley looked at him sharply.

" Yes, but we ourselves must set the example."

" Aren't we setting the example ? Of course I don't pretend to know much about these things, but I had an idea we'd scrapped quite a lot of cruisers lately."

" But we still retain armaments. As long as we retain any armaments we are furthering the cause of war."

" Even armaments for self-defence ! "

" Certainly. The only way to meet attack is by non-resistance."

" I see," said Brandon, anxious not to cramp Dr. Hensley's style by offering objections. " I suppose if the Belgians had not resisted in nineteen-fourteen there'd have been no further trouble ? "

" Precisely," answered Dr. Hensley, putting the tips of his fingers together and nodding sagaciously.

" And the Germans would just have gone home again ? Or settled down peacefully in France and Belgium ? "

But Dr. Hensley had no intention of being nailed down to details of this kind, so ignoring Brandon's question he continued to utter a series of generalisations in the same slow impressive voice, pausing at length between each :

" Love of country must give way to love of humanity. . . . Patriotism must cease to be regarded as a virtue. . . . It is for us to hasten the dawn of the new era. . . . Love will become the law of human life. . . ."

Brandon listened with interest. He understood now what Rosamund had meant in speaking of Dr. Hensley's hypnotic powers.

"Poisonous platitudes!" he said to himself. And those that were not poisonous were simply meaningless—phrases that, produced in cold print, would not attract a moment's attention. Yet this man contrived to make them sound full of meaning. His way of keeping his eyes fixed soulfully on the tree-tops, his slow utterance, the trick of oratory by which each sentence appeared to contain some profound truth, above all, those long quivering silences, clearly produced a deep effect on his audience—almost as if a spell had been cast on them.

"Like a lot of hypnotised hens with chalk-lines drawn from their beaks!" thought Brandon.

It was a relief when the circle broke up, and Dr. Hensley, remarking that he would take a stroll by the lake, the Countess settled down again for her portrait.

Rosamund took the news of Dr. Hensley's arrival quite calmly when Brandon told her of their meeting at the Villa.

"Then it *was* him we spotted on the road as we were coming back from bathing, Terence," she said.

"Yes," answered Kavanagh. "Rosamund thought she saw him coming, so we turned off down a side-lane."

"Not afraid of him any longer, Rosamund?" asked Brandon.

"No. Not afraid. Still, I'd rather keep out of reach of his *rayons*. Oh! I know you don't believe in anything of the kind, Jimmy!" she added with a laugh.

"I certainly don't. All the same, I see now what you mean by his hypnotic powers. He's mastered the art of swaying audiences just as a clever comedian

can set the house in a roar without saying anything funny but merely by a certain tone of voice. Do you call that hypnotism ? ”

“ Well, yes, I think I do. How else do you explain it ? ”

“ By the fact that people go to the theatre to be amused and are ready to laugh at anything. These people collect round Doctor Hensley to be impressed so that everything he says seems wonderful. He makes them feel his influence—but only those who are receptive to it. You’re that no longer, so you needn’t fear him.”

“ By the way,” Kavanagh said after a pause, “ we seem to be getting quite an interesting collection of members of the Order of the Phoenix here ; besides the Countess, there are Raskoff, Gustav Mervine, and now Doctor Hensley. I wonder whether there’s a Temple of the Order here ! ”

“ I’m almost sure there is,” Rosamund answered, “ for I remember members often used to visit Bogazzo. I wish we could find out where it is.”

The question was finally settled a few days later. When Rigby arrived one morning with the letters, it was evident that he again had something important to communicate.

“ What is it now, Rigby ? ” said Brandon.

“ I’ve been hearing a few things from Alessandro, sir, and there’s going to be some sort of meeting in the neighbourhood one night soon.”

“ How did Alessandro discover this ? ”

“ From a conversation he overheard between the German lady and Doctor Hensley. The lady was enjoying her morning sun-bath at the end of the terrace, and Alessandro had gone out to pick some

herbs at the corner of the terrace; you understand, sir?"

"Perfectly. In other words, Alessandro was hiding in the bushes whilst Frau Schnorrer and Doctor Hensley were talking. Good. Did they mention when the meeting was to take place?"

"On Tuesday next, sir."

"Well, we'll see if the letters throw any light on the matter."

Most of the morning's batch contained little of interest and one proved almost impossible to open. But Brandon's efforts were at last rewarded, for inside lay a letter consisting of these few lines of typescript:

ELEUSIS.

FRATRES ET SORORES,—

A great honour is to be paid to you. *Fiat Lux* himself will be present with you in the Temple on Tuesday evening bearing a message from the Hidden Chiefs. He will arrive about midday by road, accompanied by his *Fidus Achates*, and will stay at the inn on the lake, where he will remain only one night, returning to Eleusis on the morrow. The afternoon of his arrival he will spend in rest and meditation. But at 10 o'clock in the evening you must send a messenger, who will give the Tau sign, to guide him to the Temple. Greeting.

PER TENEBRAS AD ASTRA.

"So there *is* a Temple here," said Brandon, handing the letter to Rosamund, "and *Fiat Lux* is to be present at a meeting there. Have you any idea who he can be?"

"No," said Rosamund. "I've often wondered.

We used to hear of him as a very high initiate ; in fact, as the nearest we could get to the Hidden Chiefs. But he's evidently not one of them, for, as you discovered, Jimmy, he's also known as Damocles, not by the name of one of the signs of the Zodiac."

"No, therefore he's in both the political and the occult movements. Probably one of the outer ring of the inner circle—who number about twenty-five. So if we can discover his identity it will be a great step forward."

But no Machiavellian methods were required in order to find out the identity of "Fiat Lux," for conversation at the Villa Pax Mundi turned quite openly on the expected arrival of Dr. Otto Brinkdorff on the following Tuesday. The event seemed to occasion much suppressed excitement, for Dr. Brinkdorff was apparently a recluse, a personage too lofty by reason of his powers and occult knowledge to mingle with the humbler followers of the New Psychism. No one present at the Villa, except Dr. Hensley, had ever seen him, and all were longing to hear the words of wisdom that fell from his lips. It was disappointing of course that he would not accept the Countess's hospitality and preferred to put up at the inn, but the asthma from which he suffered was liable to be increased by the pollen from the plants and flowering shrubs in the garden of the Villa—the inn looking out on the lake would be better for his complaint.

Rosamund was thrilled to hear of this discovery. "I always felt," she said, "that Brinkdorff was playing an important part in the world movement, and of course if he is 'Fiat Lux' that explains it."

"Yes," said Brandon, "Brinkdorff's a man whose movements are well worth following. I've linked

him up before now with all sorts of queer cults and political intrigues. I believe I have his dossier with me." And opening his despatch-box Brandon took out a bundle of papers from amongst which he drew a long typewritten document.

"Have a look at this, Terence."

Kavanagh read the opening words of the report aloud:

"Brinkdorff, Otto. Born in Salzburg 1880, but claims to be a native of Lausanne. Illegitimate."

"Odd how many of these people are illegitimate," interposed Brandon. "The fact seems to give them a sort of grudge against society which makes them want to destroy it. Go on."

Kavanagh continued. "Mother was in employment of Archduke Leopold as a governess to his children. Father believed to be Fleischmann, the well-known Frankfurt banker. Brinkdorff was at Ingeborg University, where would have occupied Chair of Philosophy if health had not given way owing to occult practices. Suffers from occasional lapses of memory and addicted to cocaine, otherwise faculties unimpaired. Brinkdorff is a Rose Croix, a 33° Grand Orient and 90° Rite of Misraim."

Further details followed with regard to Brinkdorff's relations with the underground Communist movement and certain Pan-German secret societies. At the same time a number of discreditable incidents were recorded against him during his stay at the University. His visit to Oxford in 1928, of which Rosamund had spoken, was also mentioned, and the fact that he had enlisted supporters amongst the undergraduates.

"Do you think all this is known to the authorities

in England ? ” asked Kavanagh.

“ His Communist activities are bound to be,” Brandon answered. “ Their files in that respect are fairly complete. But his connection with secret societies would not come into their sphere of observation—the police know nothing about them. I once mentioned the Grand Orient to the Home Secretary and he had never heard of it.”

“ Yet, in spite of all that is known about Brinkdorff, he is allowed to come to England and rope in recruits at the universities ? ”

“ Oh yes,” said Rosamund, “ he’s much respected at Oxford. And he has a number of influential supporters—the Dean of Barminster, Brogden, who was Minister for Education, not to speak of Doctor Hensley. In fact, the Prime Minister himself had him to lunch.”

“ But, good heavens, why didn’t the authorities warn him ? ”

“ As a matter of fact,” answered Brandon, “ I believe the P.M. was warned, but was afraid of being thought ‘ reactionary.’ Besides, he was understood to say that someone he wanted to do a favour to asked him to invite Brinkdorff.”

“ That ‘ someone ’ being Oscar Franklin, I’ll bet,” laughed Kavanagh. “ I’m told the P.M. consults him about everything.”

“ More than likely. But to return to the matter in hand. What use are we going to make of Brinkdorff’s visit to Bogazzo ? ”

“ I wish we could get into the Temple on Tuesday and hear what he has to say.”

“ So do I. But I can’t for the life of me see how we’re to manage that.”

Brandon was silent for a moment and then added :

"At any rate, let's go and have a look at him on his arrival. We can be hovering round the inn—the Capello Nero, isn't it?—about midday and watch for cars arriving. I should like uncommonly to see that gentleman at close quarters."

Accordingly at a quarter to twelve on Tuesday Brandon and Kavanagh, strolling along the village street, became deeply engrossed in studying the picture post cards displayed for sale in the small stationer's shop opposite the Capello Nero. But half an hour went by and no car showed signs of stopping at the door of the inn.

"What about going inside and ordering *apéritifs*?" suggested Brandon.

"Good. We can put in a good deal of time over that," Kavanagh agreed.

Crossing the road, they entered the Capello Nero and asked for a couple of *vermouths* to be served them in the hall. The waiter, a striking-looking personage with the head of a Roman Emperor, was fortunately slow in carrying out the order, and the two men were able to spin out the drinking of their *apéritifs* for another half-hour. At last, just as the clock was striking one o'clock, the sound of a motor could be heard drawing up at the door.

The next moment two travellers entered the hall—a lean, sickly-looking man in a black felt hat, with lank black hair falling over his forehead and penetrating black eyes framed in horn spectacles, followed by what was evidently his *Fidus Achates*, a short man with a small pointed black beard, wearing a Tyrolean hat.

"Do you see who that is?" Brandon whispered, looking at the latter.

"Yes. Schwartzmann, isn't it?"

Brandon nodded.

"Interesting to find them travelling together—'Fiat Lux' and the emissary of Moscow. I wonder what name he's travelling under—listen!"

For the innkeeper, a German Swiss, had hurried forward to receive the new arrivals and was addressing the lean man with the words:

"Herr Doktor Otto Brinkdorff, nicht wahr?"

The doctor bowed assent and, indicating his companion, answered in the same language:

"And my secretary Herr Emil Wolff."

Then, having removed his hat and remarked on the extreme heat of the journey, he went on to explain in a precise and pedantic manner that, being extremely fatigued, he and Herr Wolff would take their *colazione* in his private sitting-room. After that he would rest and must not be disturbed. Dinner must be served them at nineteen o'clock in the same manner. He hoped that both the rooms reserved for him were quiet so that he would be undisturbed by the traffic in the village street.

"Ja, mein Herr," the innkeeper assured him, "they look out on the lake. Not a sound from the street can be heard there. If the Herren will come this way——"

Taking a couple of keys from a hook the innkeeper prepared to lead the doctor and his companion towards the staircase when, from the back of the hall, there suddenly stepped forth the figure of Alessandro holding in his hand a large bouquet of flowers.

"With the compliments of the Signora Contessa Zapraksy," he said with his usual gleaming smile and bowing as he handed the bouquet to the doctor. "She desired to present the Signor dottore with some

flowers from the Villa Pax Mundi on his arrival."

"Please convey my thanks to the Signora Contessa," Brinkdorff replied in halting Italian. At that moment Alessandro's eyes fell on his companion, and as they did so the smile faded from his face. But this change of expression passed unnoticed by the travellers, who were making their way towards the staircase in the wake of the innkeeper.

Alessandro, watching them, remained for a moment transfixed, then stepping up to the waiter who had been standing by throughout the scene, said a few words to him in a rapid undertone, whereat a look of malevolent fury flashed out on the face of the Roman Emperor.

"Come outside, Terence, I've had an idea," whispered Brandon. The two men made their way into the street.

"Well, what is it?" Kavanagh asked as soon as they were safely out of earshot.

"It's this. I've been watching Brinkdorff carefully and I believe I could make up to look like him."

"And then?"

"And then impersonate him at the meeting in the Temple to-night."

"It's a marvellous idea, Jimmy. But what will you do meanwhile with the real Brinkdorff and his companion?"

"That's just it—where we've got to get Alessandro to help us. You noticed the look he gave Schwartzmann the moment he recognised him?"

"Rather. Enough to kill the little beast stone dead."

"Just so. And if we tell Alessandro what is true—that Schwartzmann is an active member of the Inter-

national Anti-Mussolini League, he'll be game for anything. When it's a case of tackling an anti-Fascist, Alessandro can be depended on to put his back into the job. Wait, I see him coming. We'll tackle him at once."

The street was very quiet, sunk in its midday slumber, and there seemed little danger of listening ears when the manservant reached the spot where the two Englishmen were standing.

"Well, Alessandro," said Brandon in a low voice, "so you recognised our friend Schwartzmann?"

"Yes, Signore—the rat of Moscow!" the man snarled angrily, grinding his white teeth together.

"And you pointed him out to the waiter at the Capello Nero?"

"Sicuro. Carlo is a friend of mine. He also is a Fascista."

"Ah! And what did Carlo say?"

"He said it would be a good opportunity to——" and Alessandro drew his hand across his throat with a significant gesture.

Brandon nodded.

"H'm. Carlo said that? Now I wonder whether he could manage to keep Schwartzmann and the doctor as well, prisoners in their rooms this evening. Prevent them forcibly from going out, I mean?"

Alessandro stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"In that case it would be necessary to gag and bind them? Or perhaps to hit them over the head?"

"No, nothing so violent. Carlo perhaps will take their dinner up to them this evening?"

"Yes, Signore."

"Then if he could manage to slip something into their soup."

"Poison?" Alessandro interposed eagerly.

"No, no, Alessandro, not poison—only a drug. Something that will give them both a good night's rest and ensure their not waking for at least ten hours. Give one of these to Carlo," Brandon went on, taking two one-hundred lire notes from his pocket-book and handing them to the Italian. "Tell him that if he is able to do as I have suggested he shall have five times as much as this to-night."

"Bene," answered Alessandro, slipping the notes into his pocket. "But if the Signore can provide me with what is necessary?"

"That's all right. Come along to the hotel and I'll fix you up."

Brandon habitually travelled with a variety of drugs in case of emergency, and had therefore no difficulty in supplying Alessandro with the required dose of a tasteless and innocuous narcotic that could be depended on to keep Brinkdorff and his companion in a deep sleep till morning.

"Remember, Alessandro, we shall be on the look out at nine-thirty this evening. If all has gone well, Carlo will make a signal at the door of the inn with the napkin he carries over his shoulder. Then we shall know that we can enter safely and Carlo will show us up to the doctor's rooms."

"Benissimo, Signore." And Alessandro, evidently entering whole-heartedly into the spirit of the adventure, set forth for the Capello Nero, to carry out his mission.

The next thing was to enlist the help of Rosamund in coaching Brandon for the evening's ceremony.

"It's a frightfully bold thing to attempt," was her comment when Brandon had unfolded his scheme.

"I can't imagine how you're going to pass yourself off as Doctor Brinkdorff."

"Ah, you haven't realised the possibilities of my adaptable face. I don't think I shall have much difficulty in making it a very fair imitation of Brinkdorff's cadaverous countenance. Remember that none of the people at the Villa have ever apparently seen him except Doctor Hensley, who is short-sighted. Besides, it will be night-time. There's no electric light at the inn, and I conclude the ceremony in the Temple will take place in semi-darkness?"

"Yes. By the light of a few black candles."

"Good. Under those conditions I think I shall pass all right. Now I must mug up the ritual—luckily I have the one you gave me here. And you must help me with the signs, passwords, and anything else I shall have to know. Do you think I shall have to take any part in the proceedings?"

"No, Brinkdorff would probably only be expected to look on and deliver the message from the Hidden Chiefs."

"Then I'll have that ready. Wait—I've got an idea!"

"What is it?"

"If only," Brandon said slowly, "it was possible to send an adept of the Order off on an errand to one of these mysterious beings, we might——"

"I see," Kavanagh interposed eagerly; "follow him up and see where the track led to?"

Brandon nodded. "It's a bit of a gamble, but worth trying. In this sort of work it's the wildest chances that often come off best."

That evening at 9.30 the waiter at the Capello Nero was seen to appear at the door of the inn and

whisk away some crumbs from one of the tables in front of the door. A moment later, Brandon and Kavanagh entered the inn and, addressing the aforesaid waiter, asked to be shown up to Dr. Brinkdorff's apartment. Carlo, without betraying the least emotion on his imperial countenance, turned impassively and led the way up the staircase to the first floor. Only as he opened the door of Dr. Brinkdorff's sitting-room he said in a low voice with a jerk of his head in the direction of the bedroom opening out of it :

"He sleeps." And with a gesture towards a room on the other side of the passage, he added : "The other one, he sleeps also."

"Good. You had no difficulty, Carlo ? "

"None, Signore. The dottore after taking his dinner found himself overcome with slumber, and observing to his secretary that he would take some repose before going out this evening, went to lie down. The secretary did the same. They will not wake till morning. See, Signore ! " and opening the bedroom door noisily, Carlo indicated the sleeping form of Dr. Brinkdorff—attired in his underclothes—which the rattle of the handle failed to disturb.

"Shake him gently, Carlo."

The man obeyed. But still Brinkdorff did not stir.

"That's all right," said Brandon, slipping five hundred lire into the waiter's hand. "Now in about half an hour they will come from the Villa Pax Mundi to fetch the doctor—possibly it will be the Contessa Zapraksy herself. Whoever it is, you will show them up here to the sitting-room. Soon after you will see the doctor going out with them. That will not surprise you ? "

"No, certainly," replied Carlo, over whose face the light of comprehension had been gradually breaking and whose mouth now widened into a joyful grin. "It will seem the most natural thing in the world, Signore."

Carlo having departed with a chuckle, Brandon turned to Kavanagh and said :

"Now we must get to work. The first thing is to find his ceremonial robes and insignia that I shall have to take with me to the meeting. Have a hunt for them, Terence, whilst I start on my make-up."

Kavanagh began ransacking drawers and cupboards. Meanwhile Brandon, discarding his own suit of clothes, slipped into the loose black garments of the unconscious "Master," tied his black silk necktie loosely round his throat, drew forward a lock of his own hair, stained it with a dark hair-dye he had brought with him, and let it flop over one eye as he drew Brinkdorff's black felt hat down over his head. Then he started on his features.

"To people who have never seen Brinkdorff in the flesh," he announced at last, "I really think I should appear to be his spit and image !"

Kavanagh, who had found Brinkdorff's ceremonial get-up and was busily stuffing it into a bag, looked round to see what indeed seemed to be the doctor standing before him—cadaverous cheeks and large front teeth all complete.

"Jimmy, it's amazing ; how on earth did you manage it ?"

"Prachtvoll, nicht wahr ?" said Brandon, mimicking Brinkdorff's pedantic pronunciation.

"But I don't understand—you've made *both* eyes black !"

"Yes—a fine black glass-eye, isn't it? And a spot of belladonna in the other to enlarge the pupil. I don't see with it very well, but Brinkdorff's known to be myopic. By the way, I'd better be rather ill to start with in case I get into a tight place and have to be taken worse in order to get out of it. What about this?" and Brandon assumed a tragically sick and sorry expression.

"Magnificent, Jimmy—hullo, is that someone knocking at the sitting-room door?"

"Yes, they've come to fetch me. So long, old fellow."

"So long, and good luck. I'll follow when you're off the premises."

Brandon went into the sitting-room, carefully closing the door behind him and arranging a solitary candle behind his chair so that his face remained in shadow. "*Herein!*" he called out quaveringly.

The door opened, and the Countess with her secretary, Miss McNab, entered, making the Tau sign as they came towards him.

Brandon responded in the same manner.

"You find me weak and ill, Sorores," he said in a weary voice, "yet ready nevertheless to accompany you to the Temple."

Much to his embarrassment, both women fell on their knees before him, clasping the hand held out to them; whilst the Countess exclaimed rapturously:

"At last I am in the presence of the Master!"

"And these," thought Brandon, "are the people who talk about freeing humanity from the thralldom of the priesthood!" But aloud he said in the jargon of the cult: "Sorores, I salute you in the mystic title of Amen-ra. Now lead me to the Temple."

Overcome by the honour that had befallen them of guiding the Master's footsteps, the two disciples led Brandon downstairs, past Carlo, who stood, gravely saluting, in the hall, and out of the inn, where the Countess said in a low voice :

" We are leading you on foot, Honourable Master, since you decided the fatigue would not be too great for you. To go by road entails a long *détour*. On foot we can take a short cut through the forest by which we shall reach the Temple in ten minutes."

Kavanagh had determined not to let Brandon out of sight without discovering whither he was being taken and, as soon as they started off, followed in their wake until from the distance he saw them finally turn in at the gate of the clinic " Nirvana."

Throughout the walk hardly a word had been spoken ; the Countess, having enquired after the doctor's health and received the answer that he was far from well, relapsed into silence.

Opening the gate beside the brass plate which indicated that massage and osteopathic treatment might be had within, the Countess led the way to the door, on which she knocked three times. It was instantly opened by a neophyte wearing the insignia of the Order of the Phoenix.

" Welcome, Honourable Frater," he said in a low voice, making the Tau sign, to which Brandon again responded. Beckoning to him to follow, the young man led him downstairs and along a narrow passage into a small dark room, where, from the garments hanging round the walls, Brandon concluded he was intended to change into his ceremonial robes. Left alone, he dived into the bag packed for him by Kavanagh and drew out a long purple silk garment adorned

with cabalistic symbols, a sort of Egyptian headdress which he recognised as the "Nemys" described to him by Rosamund, a couple of silk sashes of different colours, and the ornaments composing the Insignia belonging to his rank. After slipping into the purple robe, he placed the Nemys on his head, crossed the two sashes over his shoulders, and affixed the Insignia to his breast—on one side a Phoenix rising from the flames and on the other a Serpent twined around a large red rose in coloured stones. Thus attired he made his way out of the dressing-room and following the Neophyte, who stood waiting in the passage, walked towards the door which, in answer to three more knocks, opened to reveal the Temple.

It was a long, low, dark chamber, illumined only by the light of seven black wax candles placed on a sort of stand in the middle. A heavy smell of incense filled the air. Around the walls he could dimly distinguish the figures of men and women in different varieties of ceremonial robes seated on long low benches, whilst two others sat apart on a raised dais at the end of the room. As Brandon appeared in the doorway, one of the two rose, and descending from the dais came towards him, making the Tau sign. Brandon again responded, and stretching his arms out before him with the swimming stroke described by Rosamund, allowed himself to be led up to a sort of throne upon the dais.

A silence ensued, during which Brandon was able to take in the details of the scene before him. In the middle of the floor was a vault made of concrete in which the outline of a coffin could be dimly discerned. At one end of the room was the altar, made of black wood in the form of a double cube, on which was placed a large red rose in a crystal vase, a red lamp, a blue

glass cup with what looked like water in it, and a red cross surmounting a white triangle that seemed to be made of ivory.

In front of the altar was a table on which five white marble tablets and a pack of tarot cards were laid. Incense was burning in a small brazier on a tripod near-by.

Immediately before him on the dais, Brandon noticed a small pedestal on which a variety of objects were spread out—a pair of bellows, a glass of water, a clod of earth, and a small bowl of oil with a burning wick floating in the middle. What the devil was he to do with these? Then he remembered their significance—earth, air, fire, and water of course. Repressing a smile, he tried to identify the different office-bearers described in the ritual. Yes, they were all there—the Hierophant seated on another throne facing the dais, holding in one hand a sceptre ending in a Tau cross and in the other a silver aspergillus such as Catholics use for sprinkling holy water. Between two marble pillars, one black, one rose colour, at the west of the altar sat the Hegemon, on the other side was the Hiereus, whilst the Kerux, the Stolistria, and the Dadouchos sat on seats apart against the wall.

Of the two men seated beside him on the dais Brandon had only been able to catch a glimpse; in one he recognised Dr. Hensley, whilst the other—a stout man with a short beard—seemed to him vaguely familiar. He was now unable to take a further look without turning his head and appearing to stare into his neighbour's face, so he sat rigidly motionless, only allowing his eyes to wander over the assembly. Amongst the figures ranged round the walls he now perceived Countess Zapraksy, Miss McNab, and Frau

Schnorrer, whilst one of the three blindfolded candidates for initiation seated near the door was clearly no other than that shining light of Conservative drawing-rooms—Lady Caroline Wentlock.

During the continued silence Brandon wondered anxiously whether he would be called upon to begin the ceremony, but his mental tension was soon relieved by the voice of the Hegemon announcing: "The Master of the Gateway will now open the Temple." Whereupon the Hierophant from his throne called upon each officer in turn to state his office and duty. As one after another rose and responded to the summons Brandon breathed a sigh of relief—evidently Rosamund had been right in concluding his rôle was only to be that of the presiding genius.

The Hierophant now left his throne and advanced towards the altar, followed by the Kerux carrying a lamp, the Stolistria bearing cups of water, and the Dadouchos wielding fire censers. Then passing to each corner of the Temple the Celebrant proceeded to sprinkle water to the four points of the compass from the silver aspergillus, intoning the while a sort of incantation in what appeared to be a mixture of German and Hebrew:

"Water descending from Binah . . . pure water . . . water of contemplation . . . fire of Geburah . . . fire of aspiration. . . ."

Brandon, seated motionless on the dais, felt a sense of unreality creeping over him, the dim light, the voluptuous Eastern smell of the incense, the chanting voice of the Hierophant, to which other chanting voices responded in the same key, the bizarre decorations of the Temple, the silent figures in their strange robes seated round the walls—all seemed like some

mad dream from which unhappily there seemed no hope of soon awakening. For the ceremony—in parts like a parody of the Catholic Mass—went on endlessly. Brandon judged at last that quite an hour must have gone by since he entered the Temple. How could people spend their nights in this weary kind of masquerade?

Now came the ceremony of initiation, when three candidates, their eyes bandaged, were solemnly paraded round the Temple and then led up to the altar, where they knelt down asking for Light, and with their hands placed upon the marble tablets took the obligation to secrecy under penalty of expulsion and death or palsy from punitive current of will.

The Hierophant then seated himself again on his throne and after a discourse on the Hebrew Cabbala, proceeded to make the following announcement:

“Fratres et Sorores, our very honoured Frater Fiat Lux will now deliver the message communicated to him by the Secret and Hidden Chiefs of the Inner Order.”

Brandon was quite ready. His plan of campaign had been carefully thought out. From certain passages in the intercepted correspondence he had gathered that another member of the Twenty-five, who was in touch with one of the Hidden Chiefs located in Bavaria, and referred to as Semper Paratus, was to be present this evening. If this person could be despatched to the Hidden Chief or member of the Zodiac in question, it would be possible, by following on his track, to discover the identity of at least one member of that mysterious circle.

Accordingly in a solemn voice he delivered the following oration in German:

“Fratres et Sorores. The Secret and Hidden Chiefs

of the Inner Order send you greeting. They commend you for your zeal in carrying out the Great Work. Before long your efforts will be rewarded. The world is awaking. The light shines from the East, and soon the whole Western hemisphere will be illumined by its beams. Then will dawn the Golden Age of which the sages dreamed and the sacred tradition handed down through generations of great Initiates will become the law of human life. Then wars and political strife will be no more and the Great White Lodge will rule supreme over the destinies of mankind. Yours is the glorious task of hastening that day by shedding the light on all around you and by developing those powers which have already raised you above the common herd of men.

"But further instructions of a precise nature must be made to you. Therefore it is desired that Semper Paratus shall present himself before the Hidden Chief in Bavaria without delay. He will start to-morrow morning and journey without pause until he reaches his destination."

Everyone bowed and a voice from a shadowy figure in the corner answered:

"The Order shall be obeyed."

Who could this be? With a rapid glance in the direction of the speaker Brandon recognised Grünberg, an agent of the Soviet Government and a man of far more importance than Schwartzmann. This was interesting, providing as it did a direct link between the occult and the revolutionary movement.

The ceremony concluded with another "prayer" from the Hierophant and the exchange of mystic signs, after which the whole assembly rose and moved to the door.

Brandon was just congratulating himself on having got through his part with brilliant success when Dr. Hensley and the man with the beard who had sat beside him on the dais came towards him and said :

"It is our desire to accompany Frater Fiat Lux home through the forest."

Brandon could only bow assent, and after everyone had changed out of their ceremonial robes, the two men placed themselves at each side of him and all three made their way out of the house.

"You must excuse me if I do not converse at length to-night, I am feeling far from well," Brandon observed in an exhausted voice, feeling that the moment might be approaching when he would have to be taken ill.

His companions made no reply, but after a few minutes, when well out of earshot of the house and alone in the silence of the forest, they glanced at each other, halted, and the man with the beard said abruptly :

"I am sorry, Brinkdorff, but we must ask you for your proofs." The tone was authoritative—the supposed Brinkdorff was evidently in the presence of one of his superiors.

"My proofs? I do not understand—what proofs?" Brandon asked faintly.

"Your proofs of identity. We must tell you frankly that we have doubts as to whether you are really Brinkdorff. If so you have certainly changed since we last met. We did not wish to challenge you before the assembly, but now that we are alone we must submit you to certain tests. First of all—this." And Brandon observed that he was making a masonic sign. Recollecting Brinkdorff's masonic degrees,

Brandon quickly adjusted himself to the situation and made the answering sign. The man then put out his hand and Brandon gave him the grip of the same degree. His interlocutor looked relieved and then uttered the sacred words :

"Nekamah bealim."

"Pharasch-chol," Brandon answered instantly.

"Can you go further?"

"Frederick," said Brandon.

"Of Prussia. Good. Now to try the path of Sophia."

"Isis."

"Osiris. That is well."

Brandon breathed a sigh of relief. He had passed both the Grand Orient and Rite of Misraim tests successfully.

"All the same," the man went on, "I must ask you for an explanation of what has happened to-night, Brinkdorff. How is it that you, who are only of the Twenty-five, are commissioned by Sagittarius to deliver a message of which I, who am also of the Twelve, have been kept in ignorance?"

Brandon suppressed a start. This was an uncommonly awkward situation for which he had been entirely unprepared. He had not counted on meeting one of the Hidden Chiefs themselves. At the same time the discovery was a thrilling one. If the Hidden Chief of Bavaria was known as Sagittarius and this man was "also of the Twelve," then the Zodiac and the Hidden Chiefs must be identical—as he supposed. But how did a member of that mysterious circle come to be present at a gathering of this obscure secret society? Who could he be? Scanning his features by the faint light of the moon that flickered through

the branches of the forest trees Brandon racked his brains to think where he had seen that thick neck, that heavy jaw, those bulging black eyes before. Suddenly he remembered—this was Oscar Franklin ! And Oscar Franklin was of the Twelve ! As these thoughts passed like a flash through his mind Brandon resolved to put his theory to a final test, and quickly recovering his presence of mind said humbly :

“ I must ask your forgiveness ; my sight is somewhat defective. I did not recognise you at once. Besides, I was not prepared to meet one of the Zodiac in such an assembly.”

He had hardly time to finish the sentence before Franklin said hastily : “ Stop ! Do you not know that word must never be mentioned ? ”

“ But we three are alone.”

“ Never mind. You must train yourself to caution.”

“ Well, then, one of the Hidden Chiefs——”

Franklin nodded, and Brandon, having proved this all-important point, went on :

“ I did not expect that one of the Hidden Chiefs would be present to-night.”

“ No doubt that may seem to you surprising,” answered Franklin. “ But it happened accidentally. I am now on my way to Venice. My car broke down close to Bogazzo ; it was necessary to stop for repairs. The Countess being a friend of mine, I asked her hospitality. She explained that there was to be a meeting in the Temple this evening and begged me as a special favour to attend. I could not refuse. She is aware only that I am a high member of the Order ; of my position as one of the Twelve she knows of course nothing. But I thought it advisable to inform you that I should be at the ceremony in the Temple

and therefore communicated with you at the inn. Did you not receive my note ? ”

“ I received no note.”

“ That is extraordinary. I sent a sealed letter saying : ‘ I shall be present this evening,’ signed with the symbol of Capricornus.”

Brandon shook his head.

“ The letter was not given to me. It must have been overlooked.” To himself he added : “ So Capricornus of the Zodiac is Oscar Franklin ! ” For a moment the exhilaration caused by this fresh discovery almost made him forget the dangers of the situation.

“ But the other letter—in cypher—that I wrote to you a week ago ? ” Franklin persisted.

“ Ah, of course, to be sure,” said Brandon, “ I received that safely, but having momentarily mislaid the key to the cypher there were portions I was not able to decode completely.”

Franklin raised his eyebrows and looked across at Dr. Hensley, who nodded his head as if in assent.

“ All this is very strange,” said Franklin.

“ Very strange indeed,” Dr. Hensley agreed.

Both men fixed their eyes searchingly on Brandon, and as they did so he became acutely conscious of their powerful personalities—clearly they were trying to hypnotise him, but Brandon was proof against such methods, and kept his eyes fixed on the lips of his interlocutors. This momentarily disconcerted them, and in the pause that ensued Brandon was able to think out his next move. He decided that the time had come to be taken ill.

“ Excuse me,” he said, “ if I do not continue this conversation, but since my illness some years ago I have been subject to acute attacks of exhaustion.

And," passing his hand wearily across his brow, "I am feeling far from well to-night and am anxious to retire to rest."

His two companions looked at each other, then Franklin said with a nod to Dr. Hensley, "I will bid you good-night—you will doubtless wish to return to the Villa. Meanwhile, I will accompany Brinkdorff to the inn and see him safely to his room."

"Oh, I assure you there is no necessity for that," said Brandon, appalled at the suggestion. What on earth was he to do if Franklin persisted in following him to the bedside of the unconscious Brinkdorff? Besides, on arriving at the inn his features might be exposed to a stronger light than that of the Temple or the forest. But nothing would induce the financier to leave him. Fortunately, however, the inn had remained extremely primitive, and the hall, when they entered, was only dimly illumined by a single oil-lamp.

Still remaining firmly at his side, Franklin insisted on helping the supposed Brinkdorff up the stairs to his sitting-room. Brandon struck a match and lit a candle carefully, placing it in such a position as to throw as little light as possible on his face.

"Where is your secretary?" Franklin said, looking round the room.

"I don't know. He went out for a walk late in the evening and has probably retired to bed. If you will excuse me I will now do the same," said Brandon faintly. And he made hastily for the bedroom door.

"No, Brinkdorff, I cannot leave you alone in this state of exhaustion." And he came forward as if to go through the door into the bedroom.

Brandon's head whirled. It was the tightest

situation he had ever been in, and for a moment his inventive faculties failed him. Then recovering himself he grasped the financier's arm and said earnestly :

"Listen, since you're kind enough to take such good care of me, perhaps you wouldn't mind calling a waiter to bring me a glass of Schnapps—it's the only thing that brings me round when I get one of these attacks."

If only Franklin could be got out of the room for a moment it might be possible to escape through the window! But the financier crossed over to the bell and pressed it. "I can ring for the waiter," he said calmly.

Brandon, now really desperate, started on another tack. "All right," he said, "I'll say good-night to you and go to bed." And he moved once more towards the bedroom door.

Franklin nodded amiably and answered : "Good. But I remain till the waiter has brought the Schnapps. Then when I have seen you drink it, I retire." And he seated himself firmly in an armchair.

"Very well," said Brandon, "then if you'll excuse me I will go and prepare for bed," and he vanished through the door into the bedroom, closing it behind him.

There on the bed lay Brinkdorff, still sunk in drugged slumber.

It was the matter of a moment for Brandon to discard the doctor's clothes, but there was no time to put on his own, for were Franklin to make a sudden incursion the game would be up. So hastily rolling them up into a bundle he dropped them out of the window on to the terrace below. Then climbing on to the sill he prepared to follow them, clad only in his underclothes. Whew! it would be a nasty drop

on to the stone flags beneath, but mercifully a few creepers straggled up the side of the house. Swinging himself out by the wooden rail that ran along the window-ledge he contrived to grasp the thick stem of a wistaria by which he descended gradually to within ten feet of the ground, then with the agility of a cat he jumped the remaining space and landed on the top of a small shrub in safety.

"That was a near thing!" he said to himself, taking a deep breath, and snatching up his clothes from the ground, he disappeared like lightning round the corner. As he pulled on his coat and trousers under the friendly shelter of an oleander by the gate a storm of laughter shook him at the thought of the financier sitting patiently in his chair waiting for Schnapps to revive the fainting Brinkdorff. By the way, what *would* happen when the real Brinkdorff was discovered?

CHAPTER X

ON THE TRACK OF THE CONSPIRACY

BRANDON'S adventure in the Temple had led to more than he had dared to hope. Franklin's question: "How is it that you who are only of the Twenty-five are commissioned by Sagittarius to deliver a message of which I, who am of the Twelve, have been kept in ignorance?" and his further reference to himself as Capricornus, definitely confirmed his theory that the Zodiac and the Hidden Chiefs were identical, and that the former name was known only to the Twelve and to the Twenty-five forming the outer ring of the Inner Circle. Not once had a Zodiacal name been used in the Lodge, where Franklin, who had afterwards revealed himself as Capricornus, had been addressed as *Potens inter Potentes*.

The identity of one member of the Zodiac, *alias* the Hidden Chiefs, had thus been definitely established: in order to discover a second, Sagittarius, the Hidden Chief of Bavaria, it was only necessary to follow Grünberg and find out whither his quest led.

There would be no difficulty in leaving Bogazzo, for the Countess's portrait was now finished. Rosamund and her mother were to leave for England on the following day. Meanwhile, the departure of Brandon and Kavanagh had been duly announced and a farewell visit paid by them at the Villa Pax Mundi on the previous afternoon. They decided, however, not to leave together, as Brandon would be freer to shadow

Grünberg if he were on his own. Besides, it would be advisable to assume a disguise. In order not to be seen in this on leaving the inn it was arranged that he should go early in the morning to the Villa, dress himself for the part with the help of Alessandro, and then go on to the station and wait for the Bolshevik to arrive. As soon as he discovered Grünberg's destination he would take a ticket for the same place and pass the information on to Rigby, who would be hovering around. Rigby would then return to Kavanagh to tell him whither Brandon had gone. Kavanagh and Rigby would then follow by a later train.

"But what are you going to do about a passport?" Kavanagh had asked when Brandon unfolded this scheme.

Brandon's face formed itself into the crease that did duty for a smile.

"Seen this?" he asked, taking a green case from his pocket and handing it to Kavanagh.

It was a German passport made out in the name of Johann Straube, with an address in Berlin, and bearing on the first page a photograph of a full-faced Teuton with a brushed-up moustache and a slight cast in one eye.

"Who on earth is this?" Kavanagh asked in surprise.

"Oh, a German pal of mine in London who kindly lends me his passport on occasion. Pleasant-looking fellow, isn't he?"

"Yes, far pleasanter than you. But surely you can't make up to look like that?"

"Wait and see," Brandon said with a laugh, putting the case back into his pocket.

In accordance with this plan, Brandon, in the guise

of Johann Straube, arrived at Bogazzo station in time for the 8.45 train, and as soon as Grünberg appeared on the scene contrived to place himself in the queue at the ticket office, where he was able to hear him say distinctly :

“ A first-class ticket for Brandesheim.”

Brandon then procured a third-class ticket to the same Bavarian town, passed its name on to Rigby, and took his own place in the train.

Throughout the journey into Germany he kept a close watch on Grünberg, making sure that he was not descending at any intermediate station. When at last they reached Brandesheim, Brandon again placed himself close to Grünberg at the exit of the station, where the latter hailed a taxi and ordered the chauffeur to take him to the Hôtel International. Brandon, entering another cab, followed in his wake, and put up at an inn not far from the hotel.

All had now worked out according to plan. Kavanagh might be expected to arrive by the next train, and would call at the post-office for the letter left there by Brandon telling him where both he and Grünberg were staying. Kavanagh and Rigby would then put up at the Hôtel International so that a treble watch would be kept on Grünberg's movements.

Meanwhile, Brandon kept the man under close observation. Calculating that he would certainly take some food on arrival, he himself consumed a hasty meal and then going out into the street strolled about for an hour, keeping his eyes on the door of the hotel. At last Grünberg was seen to emerge and make his way towards the residential part of the town. Brandon followed behind him as he turned out of the main street, and after about ten minutes reached an

avenue of magnificent villas, each in its own garden. At the gate of one of the most opulent of these, decorated floridly with wreaths and elaborate cornices, Grünberg halted and pulled the bell.

Brandon, with his coat over his arm and his handkerchief spread over his head beneath his straw hat like a typical German tourist feeling the heat, reached the spot just as the porter opened the gate in response to Grünberg's peal and recognised him with a friendly nod.

"Good-day. The gnädige Herr is not at home."

"Not at home?" Grünberg repeated in astonishment. "But I come by command. The message was brought me by word of mouth. I have travelled far in obedience to the summons."

"There must be some mistake. The gnädige Herr has left home. He went away yesterday on a visit to the General von Rauschenberg at Stolzenbach."

With an impatient grunt Grünberg drew a slip of paper from his pocket-book, scribbled something on it, and handed it to the porter with the words:

"Well, then, give him that on his return."

And turning on his heel he walked back in the direction whence he came.

Brandon strolled on along the avenue. His quest, as far as Grünberg was concerned, was ended. It had led him, however, to the house of Sagittarius, for Grünberg's words, "I come by command . . . I have travelled far in obedience to a summons," could signify only one thing—that he had obeyed the order given in the Temple to present himself before the Hidden Chief of Bavaria. And Franklin had supplied the further information that Sagittarius was the name by which that Hidden Chief was known.

But who was Sagittarius? Brandon determined to discover. It would not be difficult ; there could be no secret about the owner of this pretentious villa. So after taking several turns up and down the avenue he kept a look out for some local inhabitant such as a tradesman on his rounds, who would be likely to supply the missing clue. Ah ! there was the postman approaching from the distance and stopping at each house in turn.

Placing himself in an attitude of gaping admiration in front of the villa owned by Sagittarius, Brandon waited until the man reached the gate and observed with a nod at the garlanded cornice of the villa :

" A fine house that ! To whom does it belong ? "

" You are a stranger to Brandesheim, then ? "

" Yes. On a walking tour. From Bremen."

" Ach, that accounts for it. Everyone here knows that is the house of the great financier Geldbeutel."

And with a brief "*Guten Abend*" the man went his way.

So Sagittarius was Geldbeutel of Frankfurt ! This was evidently his summer villa. The discovery was of first-class importance. There was nothing to be gained by remaining on in Brandesheim. Kavanagh and Rigby must be stopped at the station. Collecting his valise from the inn, Brandon decided to meet the train which might be expected in an hour's time.

The two travellers duly arrived, and Kavanagh on descending from the carriage swore roundly at being bumped into by a heavy German with a rucksack on his back. But to his surprise the man, instead of apologising, leant towards him and said in an undertone :

" Hold hard, Terence. Come and have a glass of

beer in the station restaurant."

"Jimmy! By Jove!" Kavanagh said under his breath. He had never seen Brandon before in his rôle of Johann Straube and could hardly believe his eyes. That the same man could impersonate the cadaverous and intellectual Brinkdorff and this gross middle-class German tourist seemed incredible until one remembered the resources of what Brandon called his adjustable features and the effect that a different set of false teeth, an eye with a cast in it, and "plumpers" could produce. But this would have been nothing without Brandon's capacity for changing his expression and suiting his movements to the part. It was less the plump contours induced by face-pads, than the heavy German look, the clumsy manner of moving, and the general bourgeois air he had been able to assume that made him unrecognisable. Even before his accident, Kavanagh remembered that as a mimic he had been able to change his whole face at will.

"Well, Terence, how did you leave Bogazzo?" Brandon said as the three seated themselves at a table in the restaurant.

"Quite well, except for one contretemps. Rosamund's mother slipped on a rock walking up a mountain road yesterday evening, and is laid up with a badly sprained ankle. So they won't be able to leave for some days. I don't quite like the idea of Rosamund being there without us. If the affair of Brinkdorff comes out, there'll be a bit of a fracas, I expect."

"No doubt. But I don't see how it could involve Rosamund even if suspicion falls on us. No one at the Villa knows anything about her connection with us or knows she's in Bogazzo—except Hensley, perhaps."

"Yes, that's true. It's lucky we kept her dark. But now what have you been able to discover here?"

Brandon related his experiences.

"It's a great step forward to have found out the name of a second member of the Zodiac," Kavanagh said when he had finished; "now we've two—Franklin—Capricornus, and Sagittarius—Geldbeutel. What's the next thing to be done? There seems no object in following Grünberg to Stolzenbach."

"No. But it might be worth while going on there. I should like uncommonly to know what Geldbeutel's up to with von Rauschenberg—von Rauschenberg, one of the Kaiser's most famous generals in the war, and a bitter enemy of England. And Stolzenbach is still in Bavaria, only half an hour away by train and quite a pleasant spot, I believe. What do you say to putting in a few days there? We might get hold of some information by a lucky chance."

"Right. I'm game."

So it was decided that the three confederates should go on to Stolzenbach, keeping apart as before, and staying at different hotels in the village.

On arrival, Brandon put up at an unpretentious inn and inscribed himself in the visitors' book as Johann Straube. To the landlord he explained that he was on a walking tour, but as he had heard that there was some excellent fishing to be had in the neighbourhood, he thought of remaining for a few days at Stolzenbach. But he found he had made a bad *gaffe*, for the landlord answered gruffly:

"There is no fishing here for visitors. All the fishing in the neighbourhood belongs to the Herr General up at the Castle. To fish there is *streng verboten*."

This was unfortunate, since fishing is an excellent occupation for anyone who wants to find out about a country district by chatting to the inhabitants. However, Brandon decided that walks with a camera might prove equally instructive, so he answered cheerfully :

" Well, anyhow, the scenery is magnificent, I shall be able to do some photography."

" Be careful then not to photograph the Castle," the landlord said in the same gruff tone, " that also is *streng verboten*."

" And why is that ? " Brandon asked in surprise.

" Oh, it's a way these military folk have—rules and regulations about everything. And then the Herr General lives in constant fear of assassination. No one is allowed to enter his property without permission and the gates are always kept locked."

It would evidently be difficult to obtain a glimpse of Geldbeutel. Still, some news about him might be picked up from village gossip. Brandon and Kavanagh resolved to spend as much time as possible in cafés listening to the conversation of the inhabitants. Kavanagh, though unable like Brandon to pass as a German, knew the language well enough to take in all that was going on around him, whilst Rigby as a prisoner in Germany had learnt to understand a good deal. It was decided that he should explain himself to be Kavanagh's French valet, an ardent Republican, somewhat hostile to England, and sympathetic to Germany. In this way the three might be able to find out something about what was going on at the Castle and incidentally to gauge the various shades of opinion with regard to international affairs.

In general the Bavarians showed themselves quite

friendly ; the joy of a new and regenerated Germany glowed in all their hearts. Only when international questions were touched on latent animosities came to the surface. Mingled with resentment at the policy pursued by the Allies after the Great War was a certain pity for these same Allies who had failed to strike the path of salvation blazed for them by Hitler. But these opinions were expressed discreetly according to whoever happened to be present.

Kavanagh as an Englishman—for his Irish name passed unnoticed by the Stolzenbachers—heard no harsh criticism of England, only regrets that in that country Germany should be so misjudged.

“ Ach ! the English ! ” one would say, “ with them we should be friends. Are we not both of Nordic race, bound by all the ties of blood ? The war was a great mistake ; our English cousins should not have taken up arms on behalf of France. An effete race, the French. For fifty years their population has been at a standstill.”

Rigby, however, as a supposed Frenchman heard a different story.

“ How can you endure to live in England, that land of wooden-heads ? The English do not understand government. Look at their unemployed, who are paid to do nothing ! A fine country that ! The French, now, they are a spirited people, clever, industrious, thrifty ; they know how to work. With them we ought to come to an understanding.”

It was reserved for Brandon as a German tourist to hear their real opinions of both nations.

At a café one evening a political discussion arose.

“ The French and English have no national spirit,” observed a Nazi. “ They are both content to be ruled

by the Jews—France by those of the masonic lodges, England by those in her Government and public offices.”

“England is rotten with Pacifism,” said another ; “her young men declare they will not fight for King or country. A race like that is finished.”

“Yes,” said the first man, “Communism is the real force there. Already the English revolution has begun. Some time ago the King’s Palace was besieged by the mob. I saw a picture of it in an American paper a tourist left here at the time.”

“And when our leader’s representatives were over in London,” said the other, leaning forward eagerly, “they were surrounded with Communists who broke into the hotel where they were staying in the West End and made an uproar. Shouted and knocked over the tables where English lords were drinking coffee. Hans Schaeffer, who was there, wrote and told me all about it. But nothing was done to the rioters. The Government was afraid to act.”

“Ach, England is done for. We have nothing to fear from her. Look at her statesmen ! Already they have lost India. *We* have a leader, and we shall soon show the world what we can do !”

“And now that our Government is Jew-clean we shall no longer be betrayed !” added one young man more truculent than the rest, with a triumphant glance at a Semitic neighbour.

“We are as good Germans as you,” the Jew replied meekly ; “we fought with you in the war. And we conquered Russia.”

“Yes, you were good for that. But your bankers sold us in return for Palestine. We were never beaten in the field. If we go to war again we shall be victorious.

And this time Russia will be with us."

"Then perhaps we shall have a Socialist Germany!" a Social Democrat ventured to observe, whereat a brawl arose, and the landlord of the café had to interfere and separate the combatants.

But on one point both Nazis and Social Democrats were agreed—the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations were both absurd. Germany must be allowed freedom to arm. Eternal peace was idle talk. Force was the only thing that counted—a sentiment with which Brandon was able truthfully to express his agreement.

General von Rauschenberg appeared to be unpopular with both Nazis and Social Democrats; the Social Democrats disliking him as a supporter of the monarchy and the Nazis distrusting him for his lack of ardour in the cause of anti-Semitism. "He would never consent to getting rid of the Jewish business men," they would say. "But then his grandmother was a Rosenblatt, of Frankfurt, so what can one expect?"

At stated hours of the day Brandon and Kavanagh arranged to meet on a bridge outside the village and stroll into the wood close by so as to compare notes far from listening ears.

"What I can't understand," Kavanagh said, "is why a Pan-German General should be fraternising with a member of the Zodiac, who in his turn is giving orders to a representative of the Soviet Government."

"Yes, it may seem odd, but Geldbeutel is one of the principal controllers of German industry, and was the representative of the Entwaffnungs Commission of the V.V.I.D., whose avowed job was to carry out the Treaty of Versailles, but whose real aim was to arm Germany. They worked in with the Bolsheviks to

make forbidden arms, submarines, poison gas, and so on. The General being one of the old Monarchist gang which believed in co-operating with Moscow to bring about a war of revenge, therefore finds a useful ally in Geldbeutel. Some years ago at any rate he was a member of the Druidenorden, whose idea was to help Communist propaganda to spread in other countries and so start the rot. These people think they're clever enough to stop it in Germany, whilst the Bolsheviks on their part feel sure they can out-manceuvre the Germans when the share-out comes. Their real aims of course are poles apart, but the means to the end—world revolution outside Germany—is the same. They'll work together till France and England are down and out."

"Then you think the General's not altogether hostile to Moscow?"

"I think he'll be prepared to use anything that would serve his purpose—even the German Communists if their violence could be turned against the Allies of the Great War. That's where he and his kind differ from the Nazis. *They're* for tearing up Communism root and branch. He's for using it. That seems to me his game in fraternising with Geldbeutel."

"There is news to-day," a Nazi observed one evening, sitting down at a table close to Brandon. "You know that Geldbeutel the banker is staying at the Castle. And now some English swine-hounds are to arrive to-morrow. I heard it from the General's manservant. He believes they are Labour members of the English Parliament."

"No doubt they are here to intrigue with Geldbeutel," said another. "We ought to have got him

out of the country long ago."

Brandon meeting Kavanagh that evening at their usual rendezvous in the wood by the river, told him the news of the expected visitors at the Castle.

"We'd better keep a look out to-morrow evening," said Kavanagh, "and see who they are. If you manage to be at the station, I'll be strolling along the road past the Castle. We ought to be able to get a glimpse of them like that."

But recognition presented no difficulty. When the train came in, the well-known figures of Jos. Bagnall, James Pudsey, and George Renton—three prominent members of the British Labour Party—could be clearly seen entering the General's large Mercédès, but, more surprising, they were preceded by another figure, still more familiar, a charming vision in a light silk overcoat and a hat to which only the Rue de la Paix could have given birth—Mrs. Murray Bateman.

"That's a rum show!" Kavanagh said to Brandon when they met again by appointment on the bridge that afternoon. "What on earth is Mrs. Murray Bateman doing in that party?"

"I don't know it's as rum as you think," answered Brandon. "I've always told you that lady's movements were worth following. Remember, Bateman has a lot of money in Germany. He's an intimate friend of Oscar Franklin. And Oscar Franklin's a member of the Zodiac—why shouldn't Mrs. Bateman visit another member of that interesting collection? By the way, I saw in the paper this morning that she'd gone abroad to drink the waters at Schlangenbad."

"Oh, so this little trip is evidently being kept quiet. I'd give anything to know what they're up to at the Castle."

"That's what we've got to find out. I've been reconnoitring round the walls, by the way, and there's one point where they stop and end in a rusty iron gate that looks as if it was never used. It's locked of course, but one might get in that way. At any rate I mean to try."

"It's a horrid risk, Jimmy ; you'll be shot if you're caught."

"Perhaps ! More likely put into jail in Munich or somewhere. We'd better have a code ready in case I'm caught and manage to send you a message. It's got to be in German of course, and have cover names for people."

Brandon began to jot down some suggestions.

"Suppose you get away all right this evening, how will you let us know ? Shall we meet on the bridge ? " asked Kavanagh.

Brandon thought for a moment. "No. It's quite simple—watch for the light in my window at the pub. If it doesn't go on you'll know I'm not back."

"Right. In that case we'll be on the look out along the road from the Castle. So long, old chap."

At six o'clock that evening Brandon set forth on his expedition. The way to the Castle lay through the village, up a steep lane to the right, then along the edge of a ravine for about a mile. There on the left, at the bottom of a zigzag drive, were the entrance gates with a porter's lodge and a placard bearing the inscription "*Verbotener Weg.*"

From this point, the terrace of the Castle was clearly visible, and the General could be seen walking up and down it with the three Labour members, talking eagerly. Meanwhile a solitary figure, its hands clasped behind its back, stood looking out over the

balustrade to the country beyond as if sunk in meditation. Raising his field-glasses to his eyes, Brandon recognised the saturnine features of Geldbeutel.

"Keeps 'isself to 'isself, does Sagittarius!" he reflected. "Yet he's probably directing operations all the while. Ah, the others have settled down for a confidential talk!" For at this moment the General and his three companions entered a stone pavilion at the end of the terrace and were lost to sight. If only, Brandon said to himself, he could get to the other side of that high wall and conceal himself in the bushes that surrounded their retreat! He resolved to try.

Making his way round to the rusty gate at the back of the Castle grounds, he began to examine the lock and found to his surprise that with the application of a touch of oil and the introduction of a strong steel wire he had brought with him it could be pushed back without great difficulty. Then opening the gate he found himself inside the walls. "This is too easy," he said to himself, "something's bound to happen." And so it did. For, having passed safely through the woodland that bordered on the garden, he was just about to creep through the bushes at the back of the pavilion when a loud voice called:

"Halt!"

Brandon stopped as if he had indeed been shot as Kavanagh had predicted, and turned to see a powerful Jäger on the path only ten feet away pointing a revolver at his head. Instantly he threw up his arms. The man, still covering him with the weapon, advanced towards him:

"What are you doing here?" he said gruffly.

Remembering his rôle of German hiker, Brandon answered:

" I desired an interview with His Excellency."

" What for ? "

" Well, the Herr General is a famous man. And I had never seen him."

" This is not the way to approach him. Keep your hands up while I go through your pockets."

Brandon had been careful to leave the oil and steel wire at the gate and to carry nothing more compromising than a clasp knife and a pencil on his person. The Jäger, after a careful search, seemed somewhat reassured.

" I don't know whether you're a fool or a knave," he said, " but anyhow, you'll have to be locked up till His Excellency says what's to be done with you. Come on."

And grasping Brandon firmly by the arm he marched him through the back door of the Castle, and along a stone passage, at the end of which he opened a door into a small dark room with windows raised high from the ground.

" In here ! " he said briefly and, signing to Brandon to enter, he went out, locking the door behind him.

" A nasty hole to have got into," Brandon said to himself as the man's footsteps died away in the distance. The lock of this door, without a wire to help him, would certainly not be so easy to pick. Besides, once outside it he would certainly be re-arrested. The window offered no hope of escape. Placing a chair beneath it, he found that he could only just reach it with his hands, and the stone framework being rounded offered no edge that could be grasped with the fingers.

Well, there was nothing to be done but wait and hope that his native wit would help him to explain matters to

the formidable Herr General. If necessary he could feign to be a harmless lunatic anxious to obtain a glimpse of a celebrity. Meanwhile mercifully he had his cigarette-case with him.

Hours seemed to pass. A sonorous gong sounded the dinner-hour of the Castle.

Suddenly a key grated in the lock, the door opened, and the Jäger entered, carrying a plate of food and a glass of water in his hands.

"The Herr General is engaged to-night. He can't see you till to-morrow. You'll have to spend the night here. Here's some supper. We don't want you to starve to death." And turning on his heel he left the room again.

"Looks exactly like a dog's dinner!" Brandon thought as he contemplated the large chunks of meat, bread, and potatoes jumbled together on the plate. However, he was hungry and managed to consume the far from tempting meal.

All at once the sound of music struck on his ears—in the distance someone was playing Dvořák's "Humoresque" on the piano, just as he remembered hearing Mrs. Murray Bateman play it after a dinner-party in London. Was she playing it to-night? Moving to the door he listened at the keyhole, thinking the sound would be clearer there, but on the contrary it seemed farther away. Where was it coming from? At the other end of the room he could hear it plainly—ah! he had got it! It was coming down the chimney! Close up to the old-fashioned fireplace it was quite distinct; stooping he pushed his head inside it above the fireplace grate. By Jove! how wide it was, though! Much wider than one would have guessed from the outside, which had been modernised. It was

evidently one of those queer old chimneys up which little sweeps used to be sent in the old days as in *Water Babies*. Would it be possible to climb it and escape that way? It was worth trying—but not yet, the Castle was still awake; he would wait till everything had settled down for the night and the great clock which sounded the hours had struck that of midnight.

Soon the music ceased. People could be heard hurrying about in the passage outside, doors banging, everything being shut up for the night evidently. The key grated again in the lock and the Jäger entered, carrying a grey military blanket.

“You can wrap yourself in this for the night, we don’t want you to die of cold either. The nights are chilly. *Bis Morgen.*”

And he went out, taking the empty plate with him.

All was now silent, and before long the hour of midnight sounded. Brandon prepared for his adventure. First his coat and trousers must be removed, for should he fail to make his escape and be obliged to return whence he came no traces of soot must be found upon his clothing. To have attempted to escape by way of the chimney would make his situation worse. Clothed now only in his undergarments, he crept inside the chimney and looked up. Far, far above, the stars were shining. Feeling round the chimney breast his fingers grasped a projecting bit of stone—ah! there were footholds in the masonry. His foot found a support, slowly he pulled himself upwards. The climb seemed interminable until he reached the top, breathless, with grazed hands and feet and perspiring freely. At last, at last he was out on the roof and in the open air. Stepping carefully between the chimney stacks

he peered over the edge of the ramparts—no escape that way, the Castle walls went sheer down to the valley below. Well, he would try the front, looking over the garden. Equally hopeless! An inspection of the two remaining sides revealed the same situation—nowhere a friendly drain-pipe, a creeper, a gargoyle, or anything by which even a cat could reach the ground. Escape, he now realised, was impossible. He would have to return to his prison and face the interview with the General in the morning.

There was, however, no hurry, and seating himself on a corner of the wall he looked out over the surrounding country. Everything was wrapped in darkness, only in the distance a few lights in the village still twinkled. He looked up at the stars shining peacefully. Did they really control the destinies of human life as astrologers made out in their Zodiacal charts? Well, he was certainly under a sign of the Zodiac to-night—in the Castle that sheltered Sagittarius himself. Sagittarius, the Archer, one of the Trigon of Fire. . . .

Suddenly a hollow sound from one of the chimney-stacks near roused him from his meditations. Springing up, he went towards it and leant over the top. Voices down below! Voices that could be heard quite plainly; evidently the chimney acted as a sort of megaphone, increasing the volume of sound. He remembered in a flash reading somewhere that Louis XV, wandering on the roof at Versailles, had overheard the conversation of two of his disgruntled courtiers sitting over the fire and rewarded them the next day with a *lettre de cachet*. . . . Surely that was the General's voice. Looking down, Brandon saw a glow of light from the room below. Creeping inside the chimney he managed to lower himself some way until

the sounds became still more distinct, whilst at the same time the odour of cigar smoke floated to his nostrils.

"Good," said the voice of von Rauschenberg, "all will be done as you direct. These Englishmen are ready to agree to anything that will bring them back to power."

"To what they will imagine to be power," answered another voice, which was clearly that of Geldbeutel.

"Just so. And the money will be provided?"

"Yes. Through Franklin. The first instalment will be paid to them immediately on their return. The rest when they have carried out their compact. Now I will retire and leave you to complete the negotiations."

Footsteps sounded over the parquet—a door opened—"Schlafen Sie wohl" could be heard. For some moments there was silence. Then the door opened again and a hum of voices began, this time speaking English. There followed the clinking of glasses, the sound of a soda-water siphon fizzing into tumblers—denser clouds of cigar smoke wafted up the chimney.

"Then the matter is settled," von Rauschenberg could be heard saying in excellent English. "On these conditions the money will be provided. You think you have a good chance of winning the election?"

"Yes," answered a British voice, which Brandon recognised as Jos. Bagnall's. "We are pretty sure of our agents at Tory H.Q. They won't allow the other side to put up much of a fight."

"They haven't got a man with brains amongst them," said another voice that sounded like Pudsey's, "except Philip Archbold, and they hate him as a Diehard. They hate the Diehards far more than they do us."

"The Tories always hate anyone who *does* anything," said Bagnall with a laugh, "wakes 'em out of their confounded laziness—they're bone lazy, the lot of 'em."

"And what about the House of Lords," said the General; "do you think the Conservatives will go as far as that?"

"I think I can answer for them in that matter," said a woman's voice, which could be no other than Mrs. Murray Bateman's. "My husband, you know, has great influence in the Party."

"So! That is well. As long as the Lords remain the destruction of the monarchy becomes impossible. Even then you will have the resistance of the people."

"Yes, that's going to be the most difficult job of all"—this time it seemed to be Renton speaking—"worse than the break-up of the Empire. The people are dead set on the King. They won't mind doing away with the Lords, they won't mind our signing an alliance with Russia, they'll stick anything as long as they've plenty of cinemas, greyhound racing, and football going, but the Royal Family's another thing."

"Well, the Free Transport Bill will help to keep them quiet. Now for your signatures."

A long silence followed. Something was being signed. Then heavy footsteps crossed the parquet—the sound of rattling keys followed, the bang of a metal door.

"Now, what on earth's going on," Brandon said to himself. "Somebody's signed something, and they've shoved it into a safe. I'd like to have a look at that bit of paper. But how?" His thoughts stopped; somebody was speaking.

"I keep the duplicate then," said Bagnall.

"Right. Now to bed."

Good nights were exchanged. The party were breaking up. Soon a door could be heard shutting and the extinguishing of the glow at the bottom of the chimney indicated that the lights had been turned off. The party had gone to bed.

"So that's their little game," said Brandon to himself, pacing the roof. He had heard all he wanted, yet he could do nothing with it unless he could find some means of escape from the Castle. Desperately he looked down again over the battlements, only to realise once more that flight that way was quite impossible. There was nothing for it but to go back to his room and face the ordeal of the morrow. Slowly he descended the chimney, painfully clinging to the stonework, painfully groping for a foothold, and found himself once more in his prison.

What was to be done now? If he did not succeed in convincing the General of his innocence he might conceivably be shot or, more probably, be sent under armed escort to prison. In that case, how was he to let Kavanagh know what had happened?

Looking round the room, he spotted an old newspaper in a corner. A hunt through his pockets led to the stump of a pencil, for the Jäger in searching him for arms had removed none of his few belongings. Tearing off a piece of the paper, he proceeded to write in a minute hand, and in the code prearranged with Kavanagh, a brief summary of the conversation he had overheard, ending with the information that the pact signed with von Rauschenberg would be found in Bagnall's pocket. It was unlikely, he calculated, that having once been searched the process would be repeated, and he could therefore keep this scrap of

paper on his person in the hope that either Kavanagh or Rigby would be on the look out near the Castle and some means might be found of getting it to them.

Then wrapping himself in the grey blanket provided by the Jäger, he lay down in a corner of the room and slept a deep sleep until morning.

Soon after the breakfast of coffee and dry bread brought him by the Jäger, Brandon was summoned to appear before the General. The Jäger led the way, passing along the stone passage into a great hall, decorated with stags' heads and historic armour. Then opening the door into the General's study he signed to Brandon to enter and take up his stand beside the writing-table at which the General was seated, conversing in a low voice with a young man, apparently a secretary, who was handing him some small slips of paper.

"And taken quite without their knowledge?" Brandon could hear the General say.

"Entirely without their knowledge," the young man answered.

"Good." Putting the slips of paper down on the writing-table, the General, taking no notice of Brandon, rose, and moving towards the door with the secretary said a few words in a whisper. Brandon standing close to the table glanced down quickly and saw that what had appeared to be bits of paper were evidently snapshot photographs laid face downwards. During the instant that the General's back was turned, he contrived with a lightning movement to put out his hand and slip one of them into his trouser pocket.

The next moment the General had wheeled round

and, after glancing at him fiercely beneath bushy eyebrows, seated himself on a heavy oak chair at the table. With a military gesture he now signed to Brandon to stand in front of him.

"What is your name?" he said in a voice like a pistol-shot.

"Johann Straube."

"Where do you live?"

"In Berlin."

"And what were you doing in my grounds last night?"

"I wanted to see you, Herr General."

"Why did you want to see me?"

"Because you are a famous general. I wanted to see what you were like," Brandon answered with a weak-minded expression.

"Nonsense," said the General sharply, "one does not break into the property of a famous person merely to see what he's like. You forced the lock of the gate, no doubt?"

"Yes."

"That is not the act of one who is merely curious, but of a criminal. You came to assassinate me?"

"How could I assassinate you when I had no weapons? The Jäger will tell you I was unarmed."

"That is true. Then you came to spy. Come, tell me the truth, it will be better for you. Who and what are you?"

"Herr General," stammered Brandon with well-simulated confusion, "I will confess all and trust to your mercy. I am a Communist."

"Ach, so? You are a Communist. That is why you are my enemy?"

"We Communists look upon all the late Kaiser's

generals as our enemies—as the enemies of the working-classes.”

Turning to the Jäger, who had taken up his stand by the door, the General ordered him to leave the room. Then addressing Brandon again, he said :

“ So that is why you want to assassinate me ? ”

“ I do not want to assassinate you, Herr General. But I have to obey orders. I belong, you see, to a secret Communist group which desires your death. I did not vote for it. But it was decided that someone must be sent to reconnoitre, to see how well you were guarded, and the lot fell on me. I could not disobey on pain of—— ” and Brandon drew his hand with a sharp gesture across his throat.

The General looked at him fixedly.

“ You’re a brave fellow,” he said at last, “ but you’re a fool. Why should you think I am an enemy of the working-classes ? ”

Brandon now produced his trump card.

“ Because,” he said, looking the General in the eye, “ because belonging to the class you do, you are naturally an enemy of the Bolsheviki. The Bolsheviki are our friends. We want the Fatherland to become like Russia—a free land for the workers.”

“ But *Dummkopf* (blockhead)! ” cried von Rauschenberg, “ how do you know that the Bolsheviki are not my friends also ? One does not always think like one’s class. I too wish to see the Fatherland free and happy, but how could that be under the bourgeois Social-Democrats and the fetters of the Allied Governments ? Now we have a National Government, but until the Treaty of Versailles has been torn to shreds we can never be free. Only Russia can help us to recover our freedom, that is why I, like you, regard the

Soviet rulers as our allies."

Brandon gazed at the General with well-feigned surprise.

"If my comrades could know this," he said naïvely, "they would no longer desire your death."

"Well, tell them I am not the enemy of the Soviet Government. For the present I cannot declare myself, but I have spoken to you confidentially because, although you are a fool, you are a brave man and I think you can be trusted. If I let you go free now will you promise me not to work for my enemies in future?"

"More than that, Your Excellency, I will do everything to prevent any attempts being made on your life. I will use all my influence with the comrades, and I am sure they will see they have been mistaken."

"Good. You can go back to your home."

Ringling a bell on the table that brought the Jäger into the room, the General said peremptorily:

"Take this fellow down to the station and see him into the train for Berlin."

And with a gesture of dismissal he turned back to his writing-table.

"So you have been set free?" the Jäger said, as with a second Jäger on the other side of Brandon, they walked down the drive to the Castle gate.

"Yes, His Excellency understands I did not wish to harm him."

"Well, you have got off very lightly. The last man who got into the Castle grounds was shot dead by the forester. You are lucky to be allowed to go back to Berlin. The next train starts in an hour," he added.

Brandon made no reply. He was thinking rapidly how he could get his message to Kavanagh before being put into the train for Munich en route for the

German capital. Whilst he pondered, looking ahead of him he perceived, just as he had hoped, the figure of Rigby at a turning of the road.

Putting his hand in his pocket he felt for the scrap of paper which he had folded carefully into a diminutive square and now contrived to get inside his handkerchief. Then as they passed Rigby he drew the handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose with it loudly, and in replacing it dropped the square of paper to the ground, at the same time saying loudly: "At what hour shall I arrive in Berlin?"

"At about eight o'clock this evening," answered one of the Jägers, evidently noticing nothing. Brandon heaved a sigh of relief.

"Would you allow me to fetch my bag from the inn?" he said as they made their way through the village.

"Well, yes, there could be no harm in that."

Before starting on his adventure, Brandon had taken the precaution of leaving any of his belongings that could be identified in charge of Rigby, and there was nothing in his bag at the inn except the necessities a German hiker would carry with him, also a spare set of false teeth, and, concealed in the lining of the bag, a spare glass eye. Having secured this and paid his bill at the inn, Brandon allowed himself to be conducted to the station.

A quarter of an hour later he was in a third-class carriage steaming northward to Berlin.

Whilst Brandon was engaged on his adventures in the Castle, Kavanagh and Rigby waited breathlessly for his return. When midnight came and still no light appeared in his window at the inn they began to

fear the worst. If he were caught and taken away from Stolzenbach, he would have to pass through the village. They decided therefore to take it in turns to watch the road to the Castle, and so it happened that Rigby was on guard when Brandon, walking between the two Jägers, came in sight. Without giving the faintest sign of recognition Rigby kept his ears and eyes open, and caught the words: "At what hour do I arrive in Berlin?" and quickly spotted the square of paper that fell from Brandon's hand. As soon as the trio had disappeared from sight, the batman retrieved the paper and carried it to Kavanagh.

"Thank heaven," said Kavanagh; "at any rate he's alive. But where can they be taking him in Berlin? Well, anyhow, I'd better decode this message."

The story, translated from German code into plain English, was certainly astounding. But until Brandon succeeded in escaping from his captors—and Kavanagh had no doubt that his fertile brain would find some way of eluding them—no use could be made of it, unless—unless——

"If only we could get hold of the document Bagnall has in his pocket!" he said to Rigby. This had evidently been the idea in Brandon's mind when adding the last sentence to his message.

"Looks to me," was Rigby's comment, "as if those three fellows will be lucky to get away with whole skins. Some of the Nazi chaps have got wind that something's been going on at the Castle and suspect treason. I shouldn't be surprised if there was a hold-up."

"Then let's be there to see!" said Kavanagh. "I wonder when they're leaving."

"To-night, the General's manservant was saying."

"If there's a hold-up it will be on their way to the station. I think I'll take a stroll this evening in that direction."

The train to Frankfurt, by which travellers to England would most likely travel, left at ten o'clock, so at 9.30 Kavanagh set forth in the direction of the Castle. The lonely road along the ravine was the most likely spot for waylaying travellers. But all was quiet; no sign of lurking Nazis was apparent. Ah, that must be the General's car descending the zigzag drive from the Castle! Kavanagh watched the glowing head-lights appearing and disappearing as it rounded the corners, and turning out of the gates it came rushing full speed along the road towards him. He stepped aside to let it pass, when suddenly there was a rending crack, the lights swerved wildly sideways and the car, after crashing into a tree with a terrific impact, turned over on its side. The shattering of glass and rending of the framework mingled with an agonised cry from those inside it; then for a moment there was silence. There was also darkness, for the lamps of the car had gone out, and it was only by the light of his pocket torch that Kavanagh, hurrying to the spot, was able to view the wreckage. The sight that met his eyes was frightful; the chauffeur alone had been thrown clear and was lying face downwards on the road, but the top of the car had been ripped off and the three Labour members could be seen huddled together amidst the splintered woodwork. The cause of the accident was evident, for several strands of thick steel wire which had evidently been stretched across the road lay broken in the dust beside the shattered bonnet. So the Nazis had brought off their

coup and Kavanagh was here to profit by it! The victims were all clearly unconscious, and only one, Renton, was now groaning loudly.

Seizing Bagnall under the shoulders Kavanagh dragged him from the car and laid him by the side of the road. Then kneeling beside him he opened his coat and passed his hand swiftly over the man's body, prepared, if anyone arrived on the scene, to appear to be rendering first-aid. It would be easy, he reflected, to say that he was feeling for the beating of the heart. Ah, there it was, a stiff patch inside the waistcoat that could only be caused by a folded paper! In an instant Kavanagh had whipped out his penknife, cut the stitches of the waistcoat lining, and extracted the document that had been sewn inside it. Yes, this was it—von Rauschenberg's signature at the foot was clearly visible. Thrusting the paper into his pocket, Kavanagh sprang to his feet, and switching off his torch ran hell for leather back to the outskirts of the village. Then by a *détour* he contrived to arrive at the inn from the direction opposite to that of the Castle.

Meanwhile where was Brandon? The thought gave Kavanagh cause for far from pleasant speculation.

As soon as the train had left Stolzenbach Brandon drew from his pocket the snapshot he had abstracted from the General's table. Oho! This might come in very useful! It was a picture of a group comprising von Rauschenberg seated with his English guests on the terrace of the Castle. Brandon understood now what the secretary had meant by the words "without their knowledge." This had evidently been taken with a camera concealed from view, since the Labour

members would hardly desire to be photographed in so compromising a situation. But the General was clever enough to make sure of holding sufficiently incriminating evidence in the event of their defection.

Had Brandon himself been photographed in the same manner? For all von Rauschenberg's apparent geniality at the close of their interview, Brandon had noticed that the Jäger exchanged a few confidential words with the guard before the train started. Doubtless that official was being instructed to see that the released Communist reached his destination safely, and most probably someone would be sent to meet the train in Berlin and make sure that he returned to the address he had given. Then the fat would be in the fire, for the address was that of a cheap lodging-house once lived in by the real Johann Straube where Brandon would not be known. At each station on the branch line from Stolzenbach to Munich he observed that the guard glanced in at his compartment as he passed along the train; clearly he was being kept under supervision.

What was to be done? At all costs he must contrive to leave the train before it arrived in Berlin. But how could this be managed? Brandon began to think out a plan.

The only other occupant of the carriage was an Italian who, after his midday meal, had settled down in a corner, placed his large felt hat in the rack above his head, and was evidently preparing for a siesta. Before long his eyes closed, his mouth opened, and a deep even breathing announced that he was well away in dreamland.

Brandon's mind was now made up. Shortly before reaching Munich he made his way quietly to the

neighbouring lavatory with the valise containing his few belongings. Taking out of this a pair of scissors he quickly removed his fair moustache, leaving his upper lip covered with dark bristles to which the dye had not penetrated. After changing his grey glass-eye for the brown one that matched his real eye, he replaced his plate of long teeth by one he wore in ordinary life, and at the same time removed his face-pads so as to resume his normal appearance. Then just as the train entered the outskirts of Munich he slipped back into his compartment, noiselessly pinched the felt hat from the rack over the head of the still slumbering Italian, jammed it over his own forehead, walked swiftly through several carriages to the front of the train, stepped out the instant it drew up at the platform and was past the guard and the ticket collector and out in the street before an alarm could be raised. Then after making his way on foot to the Oberwiesenfeld Airport he boarded the first aeroplane which happened to be bound for Frankfurt.

But here, owing to the passport system, a hitch occurred. To get out of Germany with the passport of Johann Straube, the only one he had with him, would be impossible, since he no longer resembled the portrait of that mythical personage pasted on to it, and to change back to the disguise of Straube would be a risk in view of the possibility that his escape from the train might have aroused the suspicions of the authorities and set sleuths on his track. There was nothing for it then but to wire to Rigby to join him at Frankfurt with his luggage, which contained his other passports, including the one representing him as himself, and to wait patiently until the faithful manservant arrived.

He had soon reason to congratulate himself on the precautions he had taken, for the next evening when seated in a café he happened to pick up a paper where the words in large lettering "Have you seen this man?" appeared over two pictures reproducing the familiar features of Johann Straube both full-face and profile. Underneath them a short paragraph explained that a mysterious person giving this as his name, believed to be a Communist, had been caught trespassing in the grounds of General von Rauschenberg at Brandesheim, and was suspected of intending to make an attempt on his life; that he had been sent back under supervision to Berlin, where he stated that he lived, but had disappeared from the train somewhere between Stolzenbach and Munich. A description of his appearance followed—fair moustache, full cheeks, one eye brown, one grey, with a slight cast in the grey one, etc.—and a reward was offered for his capture.

It was lucky, Brandon reflected, that he had not attempted to cross the frontier; no doubt the passport officials would be on the look-out for the missing Straube.

"A dangerous fellow that!" a man at a neighbouring table observed to Brandon, seeing him reading the paragraph. The news had evidently created some sensation in Frankfurt, for the General was a public character, and an attempt on his life provided an incident of first-class importance.

"Yes, he looks a thorough ruffian," Brandon agreed.

"The true criminal type," the man went on. "I happen to have made a particular study of the human skull, and I can recognise the head of a murderer at a glance. Observe," and he pointed to the profile

picture, "the formation of the back of that head, how it bulges outward!"

Brandon nodded. Yes, it was certainly very different from the typical German head, going sheer up at the back, which this man evidently regarded as the model of perfection.

"That protuberance," he continued, "is the seat of criminal instincts. A man with a head like that will commit any act of violence. Look at the normal skull now, yours and mine," and he turned with a smile to contemplate Brandon.

Then suddenly the smile faded out and a look of surprise overspread his features.

"No, but this is strange," he said, "your head is not at all unlike the one in the picture; your ears also," he went on, rapidly glancing at the paper and then again at Brandon; "there is really an extraordinary resemblance."

"I hope you do not imagine that I am Johann Straube," Brandon said indignantly, expecting to be met with a shocked disclaimer.

But the man only answered: "I do not say so. I only say there is a remarkable resemblance."

"Well, look here," Brandon said, turning round and facing him boldly, "have I got one brown eye and one grey one with a cast in it?"

"No, that is true," the man answered, evidently reassured. "Your eyes are both the same colour. And they are straight. That is conclusive." And with a grumpy *Guten Abend* he got up and walked out into the street.

On receiving Brandon's telegram Kavanagh decided to go himself to Frankfurt with his friend's luggage,

but so as to avoid taking the stolen document about in Germany it was arranged that Rigby should go home with it to England and deposit it in a place of safety.

Kavanagh duly arrived with the luggage and Brandon's passport, so that it would now be a simple matter for him to leave Germany. His joy at hearing of Kavanagh's coup knew no bounds. Armed with this documentary evidence of the intrigue between Bagnall and his companions on one side and the Pan-German General on the other, they should have no difficulty in convincing the heads of the Secret Service and even of the most placid Conservative politicians of the reality of the plot and then, through the Press, of rousing the country to the dangers of the situation. It would be a sensation compared to which the famous Zinoviev letter would pale into insignificance.

"All that remains," said Brandon, "is to follow up some of the threads at home and find out who is at the back of Bagnall and Co. I see their accident is reported in the *Continental Post* as having taken place on their way home from a Socialist congress in Geneva. And they're described as not seriously injured."

"That's so?—hullo, a telegram!" Kavanagh broke off suddenly as a waiter came towards him with a yellow envelope on a tray.

"Who on earth can it be from?" said Brandon. "No one knows our address here."

"Only one person. I took the precaution of letting Rosamund know our whereabouts each time we moved, in case of emergencies. As I told you, I wasn't quite happy about her staying on at Bogazzo. By Jove, I was right!"

Kavanagh had torn open the envelope and thrust the message before his friend :

“ S.O.S. ROSAMUND.”

Brandon gave a low whistle.

“ Things must be pretty serious for her to wire that. Rosamund's not a girl to panic. We'll be off by the first train, Terence.”

CHAPTER XI

THE CHEKA

WHILST Brandon and Kavanagh were pursuing the quest of the Hidden Chiefs in Germany, events had been moving forward in Bogazzo.

Brandon had often wondered what happened after his escape through the window of Dr. Brinkdorff's bedroom. The story may be briefly told.

After pressing the bell in the sitting-room Oscar Franklin sat down in an armchair and waited five minutes before the waiter, who had been roused from slumber, replied to the summons. Peremptorily ordering him to bring a glass of *Schnapps* at once Franklin waited another five minutes before the required restorative arrived. Taking up the glass he then walked to the bedroom door and tapped gently. There was no reply. Franklin knocked again, this time more loudly, and still meeting with complete silence he at last opened the door quietly and peeped in. The room was in darkness. Lighting a match, he saw to his surprise that Brinkdorff was on the bed asleep, with his face turned to the wall. Franklin listened for a moment to his even breathing and then decided that the doctor, having evidently succumbed to natural exhaustion following on the long ceremony in which he had taken part, the best thing was to leave him to sleep in peace.

It was therefore not till next morning that anything unusual was discovered. The doctor's friends, fore-

most amongst them Oscar Franklin, on calling at the inn to enquire after his health, were concerned to find the doctor looking paler than ever and in a dazed condition, for which his secretary, "Herr Wolff," who seemed no less confused in mind, could offer no explanation. Gathered around him in his sitting-room the leading members of the Order of the Phoenix plied him with questions about the previous night's happenings, but found to their astonishment that he did not even realise that he had been present at the ceremony in the Temple. His mind appeared to have become a perfect blank.

"I remember nothing," he said finally, "since dining last night here in this room with Schwartzmann. Afterwards we felt unaccountably sleepy, and went to take some rest before starting for the ceremony. But I have no recollection of attending it or of anything until I woke this morning in my bed."

"Then there has been treachery!" Franklin said triumphantly. "And my suspicions were right. Both Hensley and I doubted whether the person who visited the Temple last night was really Fiat Lux, but he passed all the tests we put to him successfully. Now that I see your face in daylight, Brinkdorff, I see that I was right at first, and that someone has been impersonating you!"

A cry of horror went round the group. Brinkdorff himself sat gazing at them helplessly.

"It is evidently true," he said at last. "I was certainly not last night at the Temple!"

"Then the message from the Hidden Chief of Bavaria was a fraud," said Dr. Hensley. "And it is now too late to stop *Semper Paratus*; he has already started."

Worse still, no one knew what address would find him, for he had left no directions as to where he would be staying.

"This is terrible," said Franklin, rising and walking furiously up and down the room. "A spy has evidently been at work amongst us. Who can he be?"

"I can throw no light on the matter," Dr. Brinkdorff said gloomily, "unless this provides a clue." And he held out a large handkerchief stained with paint and the letter B. in one corner. "I found this in the pocket of my coat this morning. It is not mine."

"Ah!" said Franklin, grasping the handkerchief eagerly. "The owner of this must be found. Whoever impersonated Brinkdorff evidently left his own handkerchief in the pocket of the coat into which he changed. No stone must be left unturned in order to track him down."

"Whoever he is," Countess Zapraksy observed, "he must be someone familiar with the ritual of our Order. How otherwise could he have known the signs and given the right passwords on entering the Temple? Who in Bogazzo should know all this?"

"There is one person," Dr. Hensley said quietly.

Everyone looked with a start in his direction.

"Who?" they asked in chorus.

"Rosamund Dare," answered Dr. Hensley.

"Rosamund Dare!" echoed the Countess. "The girl who used to be in the Order and left it with young Peter Markham? You don't mean she is in Bogazzo?"

"She was here a few days ago. I saw her on the road. She was with a young man whom I did not notice. I only recognised Rosamund Dare herself."

"Then he," Oscar Franklin said firmly, "must have

been her accomplice to whom she betrayed the Order. And she will incur the penalty," he added significantly.

"The first thing is to find out where she is," said Dr. Hensley. "That should not be difficult. There are only four or five inns and hotels in Bogazzo. Enquiries must be made at each."

The search, as Dr. Hensley had predicted, proved easy. At the end of a few hours Rosamund and her mother had been located at the Hôtel Monte Rosa. The same evening Dr. Hensley, accompanied by Countess Zapraksy, called at the hotel and asked to see Miss Dare. But the answer was returned that the signora being ill, the signorina was occupied in looking after her and could see no one. The two callers retired baffled.

Rosamund was careful after this to remain indoors as much as possible. She had not been given the names of both visitors, but since one had been announced as Countess Zapraksy she quickly scented emissaries from the Order of the Phoenix, and for a week never ventured into the village street, only breathing fresh air at intervals on the terrace of the hotel.

But one evening Lady Dare being in pain and needing a fresh bottle of liniment for her ankle, Rosamund, casting caution momentarily to the winds, hurried up the street to the chemist. She was just returning safely with the bottle when at the gate of the hotel garden she found herself face to face with Dr. Hensley.

Avoiding his glance, she attempted to turn in at the gate; but Dr. Hensley barred her way.

"I am sorry, Miss Dare, but I must detain you for a moment."

Rosamund stopped as if paralysed ; all the blood ebbed away from her face, leaving it as white as the gardenia to which Kavanagh had compared her.

" I must ask you," the doctor went on in the authoritative voice she knew so well, " whether you know to whom this belongs ? " And he held out a large paint-stained handkerchief.

Rosamund gave a little gasp of relief. So this was all he wanted to know ! The handkerchief of course was Jimmy Brandon's—no one else she knew used a fine linen handkerchief as a painting-rag—she had often laughed at him for this strange habit. The recollection following on the moment of fear she had just passed through, brought with it such a sudden reaction as almost to make her laugh now. But she had sufficient presence of mind to answer hastily :

" I don't know anything about it. Is a lost pocket handkerchief of so much importance ? "

" It is of considerable importance in this case. This handkerchief," Dr. Hensley went on, looking at her keenly as he spoke, " was found in the coat pocket of Doctor Brinkdorff."

" Of Doctor Brinkdorff ? " Rosamund repeated, momentarily puzzled. Then suddenly the whole truth dawned on her. Jimmy's escape through Brinkdorff's window had been graphically described to her by Terence before he left Bogazzo ; evidently Jimmy had slipped his own pocket handkerchief into the coat of Brinkdorff's he had put on in order to attend the ceremony in the Temple, and in his haste to change Brinkdorff's clothes for his own he had forgotten to remove it. It was unlike Jimmy to commit such a blunder, but even the most expert sleuth is liable to make a slip under absolutely unforeseen circumstances.

Dr. Hensley was quick to detect the look of comprehension that passed, though only in a flash, over Rosamund's face.

"You know all about this—about the impersonation of Brinkdorff!" he said, keeping his eyes fixed on her as if to see into her very soul.

"I know nothing," Rosamund said faintly.

All her old terror of this man revived: never before had she felt his dominating personality so keenly, and she trembled lest it should force her into some fatal admission.

"It is no good denying it," Doctor Hensley said firmly; "you cannot deceive me. You know all about this. The man who impersonated Brinkdorff is your accomplice, to whom you betrayed the secrets of the Order."

Rosamund felt her knees literally swaying under her; was she going to faint? Then suddenly pulling herself together she threw up her head and said:

"I repeat that I know nothing, and if I did know I would not tell you. You have done enough harm in your time, Doctor Hensley, but you can't hurt me now. I know all about you, and I'm not afraid of you. There are powers greater than yours that will protect me!"

Doctor Hensley stepped back petrified. His cold calm face was white with anger. No one had ever dared to speak to the saintly Fellow of St. Stephen's in this way before.

"Very well," he said freezingly, moving aside to let Rosamund pass. "But you know the penalty that awaits the traitor!"

And turning on his heel he walked away in the direction of the Villa.

Rosamund's first thought on seeing Doctor Hensley's figure retreating in the distance was one of overpowering relief. He had threatened and she had defied him ; for the moment the danger had passed. But was it over ? Might not there be some truth in the claims these people made to have occult powers ? Apart from this, who knew what they might attempt ? This was not London with a friendly " Bobby " at each street corner ; strange things happened on the Continent, and she had no friends in Bogazzo. If only Terence and Jimmy were still here ! To them danger presented no terrors, but only the spice of life. Suddenly she came to a decision. Terence had wired her his address that morning. Walking hastily up the village street she entered the post-office and wrote out a telegram : " S.O.S. ROSAMUND."

After that she felt calmer. Once Brandon and Kavanagh had returned there would be nothing more to fear ; meanwhile, she would not venture outside the house again. That night she sat out late on the balcony of her room on the first floor, looking out over the lake, breathing the flower-scented air that rose from the garden below. If only peace were possible ! But the meeting with Doctor Hensley had brought all the sad and terrible memories of the past crowding back into her mind. " They are trying to reach me," she said to herself with a shudder, " directing punitive currents of thought against me." And moving into her room she knelt by her bed and prayed as she had never prayed before. After a while it seemed as if a great peace were settling on her, and getting into bed she lay down and closed her eyes.

Gradually she felt herself sinking into sleep. And as she slept she dreamed—pleasant dreams at first,

then suddenly it seemed as if she could not draw breath. She was at the bottom of a dark pit, struggling upwards to the daylight, and each time she reached the top hands grasped her and pushed her downwards. Then at last she sank back exhausted to the bottom and blackness closed around her.

Kavanagh had never known time pass so slowly as during the flight that he and Brandon made across Germany. Rosamund's telegram, despatched at 8 p.m., had not reached them till the following morning. On looking up time tables they found that it would take them at least twenty-four hours to reach Bogazzo from Frankfurt by rail, so they had decided to charter an aeroplane. But since there was no landing-place in the neighbourhood of Bogazzo, they were obliged to finish the journey by car. It was evening by the time they reached their destination and, driving straight to the Hôtel Monte Rosa, they enquired for Miss Dare.

"Ah, then the signori have not heard?" said the hotel-keeper, raising his hands with a tragic gesture.

"No. What has happened?" Kavanagh asked breathlessly.

"The signorina has disappeared. If the signori will go up to the signora's room they will hear the whole story."

Lady Day received them in silence, only holding out her hands towards them; for the moment it seemed as if she could not trust herself to speak.

"Rosamund has been taken away," she said at last brokenly. "She vanished from her bed during the night."

"You mean she has been kidnapped?" said Brandon.

"There is no other conclusion. Rosamund would never go away without a word. One of the sheets off her bed is missing, so it seems that she was let down in it from the balcony. There were marks on the flower bed below and the plants were crushed as if several people had stood there."

"But how is it that she didn't scream for help?" asked Brandon.

"Apparently she was unconscious. A wad of cotton wool that seems to have been soaked with chloroform was found beneath the window. It must have been held over her mouth in her sleep. Who can they be? Who would want to kidnap Rosamund?"

Brandon and Kavanagh looked at each other blankly. It was difficult to enlighten Lady Dare, for she knew nothing of her daughter's experiences in occult societies. Rosamund had never dared to tell her, knowing that they would only shock and pain her needlessly.

"Leave it to us, Lady Dare," Brandon said soothingly. "We'll try and get to the bottom of the whole affair. I suppose the police have been informed, by the way?"

"Oh yes, but they seemed unable to do anything. Thank God you've come," she added fervently.

"I think our best plan is to go at once to the Villa Pax Mundi," Brandon said as the two men made their way out of the Hôtel Monte Rosa. "The Countess must know if any of her lot are concerned in this, and we may be able to get some information out of her."

"Yes," said Kavanagh, "Rosamund always maintained that she was not really 'in the plot,' so it seems to me that if we could open her eyes to the whole thing she might be willing to say what she knows."

"That's quite possible. But we shall have to go very carefully to work. It never would do to rush her."

"No. But the trouble is, there's no time to lose. Anything may be happening. At any rate, Alessandro is sure to play up. He may be able to help us a good deal."

The Italian received them with his usual gleaming smile on opening the door of the Villa, and the Countess seemed overjoyed to welcome them back to Bogazzo. She was alone now, she explained, as all her visitors had left; the last, Doctor Hensley, had returned only that morning to England.

But Brandon cut short the flow of her conversation by saying firmly:

"We've come to see you about a very urgent matter, Countess. An English girl, Rosamund Dare, has been kidnapped from the Hôtel Monte Rosa."

"Kidnapped?" the Countess repeated blankly, turning pale around the rouge on her cheeks and lips.

"Yes, kidnapped—last night from her bed. We think you may be able to throw some light on the matter."

"I? How should I know anything about it?" the Countess said indignantly.

"I think you know Rosamund Dare," Brandon said quietly, looking the Countess in the eye.

"Certainly I know who you mean. I knew her once, that is to say."

"When she belonged to the Order of the Phoenix?"

The Countess gave a start. "What do you know about that?"

"I know a good deal about it. I know also what a risk Rosamund ran in leaving it."

"Ah, then it was perhaps to you that she betrayed it? And in that case it was you who impersonated Doctor Brinkdorff? Another time," the Countess went on sarcastically, "when you wear someone else's clothes be careful not to leave your handkerchief in the pocket!" And opening a drawer she drew out the paint-stained square of linen and handed it to Brandon.

Brandon looked at it, cold with horror. Had he really committed this ghastly blunder, thereby incriminating Rosamund? The idea was so terrible that for a moment his presence of mind deserted him, but quickly recovering it he said:

"Never mind about Brinkdorff now; the point is that Rosamund has been kidnapped. Whatever she has done you cannot be a party to that!"

"Certainly I am not a party to it. All violence is hateful to me. If what you say is true, I will certainly give you all the help I can."

"Then tell us the names of the people likely to be concerned in this."

And as the Countess hesitated Kavanagh interposed vehemently:

"Don't you understand, Countess, that this is a matter of life and death? To put it bluntly, we are afraid of Rosamund Dare being murdered by Bolsheviks."

"By Bolsheviks?" cried the Countess, "but what should I know about Bolsheviks? You know that Bolshevism has always been abhorrent to me."

"I believe it has," said Brandon, and he spoke the truth, for there could be little doubt now the woman was sincere. No one could simulate the panic-stricken expression of her face. But it was necessary

to open her eyes completely in order to enlist her help. So curbing Kavanagh's impatience with a glance, Brandon went on speaking rapidly :

" It is time you should hear the truth. Do you really not know the true character of the people with whom you have been associated ? Do you not know that your Villa is being used as a clearing-house by Bolshevik couriers ? That Schwartzmann, the emissary of Moscow, was here recently ? That Grünberg, one of the principal agents of the Soviet Government, was present at the meeting in your Temple ? "

" This is impossible ! " Countess Zapraksy answered with a cry of horror. " I can't believe all this. "

" Well, if you don't believe me, ask Alessandro. He will tell you everything. "

" Call Alessandro then to come here immediately. "

The man, responding quickly to the summons, and having been told briefly about the kidnapping of Rosamund, needed no urging to give his evidence. The Countess listened in dismay. It was perfectly clear now that she had been the tool of more cunning brains. Wrapped in her occult imaginings she had never dreamt that Bolshevism, which was really abhorrent to her, played any part in the background.

" It is terrible, " she said at last, " to think that my house, the Villa Pax Mundi, that I desired to be a centre of peace and enlightenment for the world, should have been used for such a purpose. It had been represented to me that the correspondence which was left here would be called for by messengers of the Great White Lodge, some of them emissaries from the Chiefs of a high spiritual Order. That they were emissaries of Moscow never entered my thoughts. Why did you never tell me all this, Alessandro ? "

"I feared the Countess would not believe me. And until the signori inglesi came I had no proof."

"But now you do know, Countess," urged Kavanagh, frantic to get back to the real business of the evening, "will you help us to find Rosamund Dare? And will you lend us Alessandro?"

"Of course. But where should the search begin?"

"At the clinic Nirvana," said Alessandro, nodding his head knowingly.

"At Nirvana!" cried the Countess. "What do you mean, Alessandro?"

"The Contessa does not know what they say in the village!"

"No. What do they say?"

"They say," the Italian went on, no longer afraid to speak out on the subject and pouring forth a torrent of words, "they say that strange and terrible things take place at the clinic, that cries have been heard there—gridi, gridi"—and he rolled the r's on his tongue—"at dead of night—cries as of souls in pain. Giuseppe, who was once passing through the forest at two in the morning, heard this with his own ears. And others have heard it too. They say also that patients arrive only in cars, never by train, usually at night, and that no one knows what becomes of them. They say the doctor himself is a devil in human form, and that la Sorella Célestina has the evil eye; they say——"

"But why did no one in the village say this to me?" broke in the Countess, momentarily stemming the torrent.

"They were all afraid!" said Alessandro, starting off again. "They feared the vengeance of these accursed ones. Old Teresa Gelotti, who, as the Con-

tessa knows, is well educated and reads the newspapers, once said something fearful about the clinic, and immediately her best goat died mysteriously as if a spell had been cast on it. After that no one dared to speak of 'Nirvana' except in a whisper—they feared black magic."

"But you need not fear black magic here," interposed Brandon; "speak out, Alessandro, tell us what old Teresa said?"

"She said," and Alessandro's voice sank to an awe-struck whisper, "that she believed *Nirvana was a Cheka!*—a Ghépéu!"

"Good Lord!" shouted both the Englishmen, starting to their feet. And seeing the Countess's bewildered expression, Brandon added: "The G.P.U. or OGPU—once known as the Cheka. It has branches, you know, all over the world. Can 'Nirvana' be one? I might have suspected it was something of the kind when I recognised Krovavaya Katya of the G.P.U. in Sœur Célestine."

"What?" cried the Countess in amazement, for knowing Russian, she understood the meaning of this ghastly title. "Sœur Célestine—Bloody Catherine! Nirvana a Cheka! And I who believed it was a place of peace and healing! This is too horrible! Too horrible!"

There was now no holding Kavanagh. Cutting short the Countess's lamentations, he grasped first Brandon, then Alessandro, with a grip of iron and almost dragged them to the door, shouting like a man demented: "Rosamund in a Cheka! For heaven's sake let's start at once for the clinic! There's not a moment to be lost!"

"You shall have my car," the Countess said, now

thoroughly roused. "It will take you there in a quarter of an hour. And I will give you the key of 'Nirvana.' At this time of the night it will be locked. But I have one of my own that was left here when I had the clinic built. Take it." And she handed it to Brandon.

"Thanks. Then we'll be off."

Hardly waiting to take leave of the Countess, the three men hurried to the garage and Alessandro seated himself at the wheel.

"If the signori permit," he said, "we will stop on our way through the village and pick up two or three of my comrades to go with us. Who knows what we may meet with at the Ghépéu! It is as well to be prepared."

It was very dark when the six men descended from the car at a short distance from the clinic and made their way stealthily towards the gate, Brandon and Kavanagh each with an automatic in his pocket, whilst the Italians—Alessandro and his Fascist allies—had armed themselves with stilettos and also, in spite of the Duce's prohibition, of that most potent weapon of Fascism—a huge bottle of castor oil.

The house, when they reached it, was wrapped in darkness, the shutters were all closed, and not a glimmer of light could be seen between any of them.

"Hush!" said Brandon, signalling to his companions, who were talking in an undertone, "we mustn't make a sound. No warning must be given of our approach."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before a piercing shriek from within the house rent the silence of the forest.

“Rosamund!” said Kavanagh in an agonised whisper. “I’m certain that was her voice!”

Brandon nodded grimly, but said nothing.

“They are assassinating her, certainly they are assassinating her,” Alessandro said excitedly. “Dio mio!”

“Keep quiet, Alessandro, there’s no time to lose, we must get in as quickly as possible.”

Moving forward on tiptoe the six men opened the gate noiselessly and crept up to the door, which, as the Countess had said, opened with the key they had brought from the Villa. Here again everything was dark and silent. On reaching the hall they paused and listened, but still not a sound was to be heard.

“The silence of death!” whispered Alessandro, and did nothing thereby to relieve Kavanagh’s apprehensions.

“Half a minute,” said Brandon softly. “We’ll go to the Temple. Come on!” And he moved quickly towards the stairs leading to the underground chamber into which he had been taken as Doctor Brinkdorff.

As soon as they had reached the lower passage a dim shaft of light met their eyes. It came from a small window in the wall at the side of the door opening into this chamber, being used presumably as a peep-hole through which the person performing the office of a “tyler” in masonic lodges could keep a watch on those who entered. No such precautions had evidently been held necessary to-night, for as they advanced towards the window and looked through nothing obstructed their view of what was going on inside.

The strangest spectacle now met their eyes. On the dais were seated three masked men clothed in the robes and insignia of some mystic Order—not that of

the Phoenix—and facing them on a stool, with her hands tied behind her back, sat Rosamund Dare, dressed in a red kimono thrown over her long white silk nightgown, pale as death, and her eyes wide with terror—like a white dove, thought Kavanagh, confronted by a cobra.

“My God! I can’t stand this!” he whispered, about to rush forward. But Brandon interposed.

“Shut up, Terence. I *must* hear what that fellow’s going to say.”

For the central of the three masked figures had stretched out his hand towards the girl’s trembling form and was beginning to speak.

“So,” he said in a voice vibrating with anger, “you refuse to reveal the name of your accomplice who practised this imposture on the Order, profaning the precincts of the Temple itself?”

It was the voice of Oscar Franklin—in the ears of Brandon and Kavanagh there was no mistaking the guttural accents of the financier—Capricornus, of the Zodiac!

Rosamund made no reply.

At this moment there moved forward from the shadows at the end of the room two figures, hitherto out of the range of vision of the watchers at the peephole. These two were unmasked and could be instantly recognised as Gustav Mervine and Sœur Célestine *alias* Krovavaya Katya, of the Cheka.

“We have questioned the culprit throughout the whole day, honourable Master,” said Mervine, his small evil eyes gleaming from his fleshy face, “but not a word could we obtain from her.”

“Third degree methods no doubt,” whispered Brandon, and again Kavanagh started forward to enter

the room. But again Brandon clutched him by the arm saying :

"No, wait. We must see what they mean to do. There'll be time to stop them."

"We have not resorted to the severest measures," said Krovavaya Katya, casting a venomous glance at Rosamund, with cherished memories of the Lubianka evidently simmering in her brain ; "if the honourable Master will permit we will attempt a method that will soon open her lips."

Kavanagh shuddered ; never had he looked on a more fiendish countenance than that of the woman whose clutching fingers itched to seize her trembling victim.

"It is useless," said another of the masked figures on the dais, and the listeners recognised the voice of Doctor Hensley. "I know something of the prisoner. Nothing will make her speak."

"Then," said Franklin, "she must incur the extreme penalty." And assuming the rôle of judge, he addressed the prisoner in the following words :

"You must hear the sentence, once Soror Stella Lucida, now a renegade brought to justice. For betraying the Order and violating your obligations of secrecy, you are condemned by command of the Hidden Chiefs to incur the penalty defined in the solemn oath you took on your initiation. A punitive current will now be directed against you ! Frater Laboro per Obscurum and Soror Nihil nisi Benevolens, place the delinquent in the chair !"

Like some fierce beast of prey, her eyes gleaming and her cruel mouth set remorselessly, Krovavaya Katya advanced towards Rosamund, and grasping her by the shoulders was about, with the help of Mervine, to

drag her towards a chair placed on a small platform at one side of the room, when the girl, opening her lips at last, uttered another piercing scream and started to struggle madly.

"Do you see what they're going to do?" Brandon whispered excitedly. "That's the chair used for high-frequency treatment! They're going to electrocute her! Now all together, come!"

And at the signal from Brandon, the six men burst into the room.

There was a moment of palpitating silence. Then Kavanagh, dashing forward, snatched Rosamund from her captors.

"You damned devils!" he yelled; "you filthy swine!" he repeated, holding the almost fainting girl closely in his arms.

There was now no holding the Fascists. With one accord they flew first at the throats of Gustav Mervine and Krovavaya Katya as if to choke the life out of them; then rushing the dais they dragged the masked figures from their seats, tearing off their masks to disclose the features of Oscar Franklin, Doctor Hensley, and Raskoff. Turning from one to another of the five they shook them like rats, howling imprecations:

"Scellerati! Canaglia! Mascalzoni! Bisogna ammazarle!"

Stiletos flashed in the air.

But Brandon interposed:

"Hold hard, Alessandro. I want these birds. They're more useful alive than dead."

"But they were going to electrocute the signorina!" Alessandro cried excitedly. "You understand?" he repeated in Italian to his companions, "they were going to place her in the electric chair?"

"Then they shall be placed there themselves!" the men shouted.

"Yes, yes!" echoed Alessandro. "To the electric chair!"

"This is going to be murder," Kavanagh whispered hurriedly to Brandon under cover of the pandemonium which arose whilst the Italians discussed who should be the first victim. "Shouldn't we stop them and call in the police?"

"Yes, later. But I wouldn't count too much on the police. Remember, we're in Switzerland, where the Grand Orient is all powerful and Franklin is a thirty-third degree mason. Anyhow, let the Fascists give them the fright of their lives first. They can do that without turning on the current. Listen, Alessandro," he went on in Italian, going up to the manservant, and grasping him by the shoulder, he whispered a few words into his ear.

Alessandro nodded comprehension, then with a wink at Brandon seized the nearest of the five, who happened to be Doctor Hensley, and frogmarched him towards the chair, whilst the other members of the rescue-party formed a cordon round the remaining four to prevent them intervening. The Fellow of St. Stephen's, who had not caught Brandon's whispered instructions, seemed too paralysed with terror to resist. But hardly had they time to force him into the chair before he gave a gasping choke and his body fell forward with his head upon his knees.

"Hullo," said Brandon, momentarily startled, and dashing to the doubled-up figure in the chair. Grasping him by the shoulders he raised them upwards, but the head still drooping forward, he lifted it by the chin, and as he did so a gasp of horror arose from Franklin,

Raskoff, Mervine, and Krovavaya Katya.

Doctor Hensley was dead.

There could be no mistake about it. Feeling his heart Brandon at once realised that it had stopped beating.

This was an unexpected development. He had never intended that the current should be turned on, but simply that the man should be given a taste of the terror he had inspired in Rosamund. That one moment, however, had done it, and he had literally died of fright.

Whilst his four accomplices, appalled at his fate, cringed for mercy to the rescue-party, Brandon did some rapid thinking.

The situation was really uncommonly awkward. He had intended all along to restrain the Fascists if possible from actually killing the culprits, for much as they deserved this fate, he was Englishman enough to recoil from lynch-law methods. It was true that he had no great faith in the Swiss police; still, after giving them the fright of their lives, he had meant to have them handed over to the authorities in the hope that some justice would be done. But now if he, Kavanagh, and Alessandro were to be involved in a legal enquiry into the whole affair, how were they to prove their own innocence in the matter of Doctor Hensley's death? The four accomplices would of course give evidence against them; they might even declare that they had actually turned on the electric current and killed the doctor. Would an inquest reveal the contrary? Brandon could not feel quite sure.

What was to be done, then? Leave the Fascists to finish off the culprits so that there would be none

left to tell the tale? But could they be depended on to do it so skilfully that no traces of the slaughter would be found? Brandon hardly thought so. Then an enquiry would follow, and the English members of the party would be held up in Switzerland over an affair which might take months and seriously hamper their plan of campaign at home. No, the only thing was to get out of it all as quickly as possible, even though it might mean sparing the would-be murderers from being brought to justice.

"Look here, Alessandro," he said, taking the Italian aside and speaking in a rapid undertone. "This business has gone far enough. We've got to get the lady out of here—into the car. And you and your friends had better clear out, too. Leave these miserable creatures alone, they've had fright enough."

"But not without a drink at parting!" cried Alessandro, advancing towards them with a gleaming smile, and the bottle of castor oil held triumphantly aloft. Grasping first Franklin, then Mervine, Raskoff, and Krovavaya Katya firmly by the throats, the three Fascists then proceeded to pour the contents of the bottle down their gullets. In vain they struggled; the Italians' iron muscles were more than a match for Franklin's and Mervine's flabby resistance, for Raskoff's puny blows, or the woman's catlike squirmings.

Leaving their wretched victims spluttering and heaving in a corner of the room, the rescue-party made their way upstairs, Kavanagh supporting Rosamund, the Fascists carrying the body of Doctor Hensley, which they took out into the forest and deposited on a pathway. By this means it was hoped that all legal enquiries would be avoided, for Doctor Hensley, when discovered, would appear to have died of heart failure

whilst walking in the woods, and the only four people who knew the truth would certainly be very careful to keep their mouths shut.

Brandon and Kavanagh had taken the precaution to keep the aeroplane in which they had flown from Frankfurt ready in case of emergency at the neighbouring aerodrome, so that it was only a matter of an hour or two to transport Rosamund in the Countess's car back to the hotel to rejoin her mother, pick up Lady Dare, and drive on all together to the starting-point for England.

Dawn found them winging their way across Switzerland, leaving Bogazzo and its terrible memories far behind them.

CHAPTER XII

COSMOS

It was many weeks before Rosamund recovered from her terrible experiences. The shock of her capture, the mental strain induced by twenty hours of ceaseless questioning by one cross-examiner after another without food or sleep, the horror of feeling herself dragged to her death by the clutching fingers of Krovavaya Katya, had brought about a complete collapse. For ten days she lay in a darkened room, unable to talk, and hearing nothing, but answering, coherently, though faintly, when spoken to.

But as her strength gradually returned it became evident that this collapse was purely physical ; there was no sign of the mental distress her earlier experiences in occult circles had induced. In a word, she was no longer afraid of the power these people could exercise over her.

" I've always felt somehow," she said to Kavanagh when at last he was allowed to come and sit beside the divan on which she lay, " that if I could once get up against them, meet them in the open, put up a fight and get the best of it, I should be free for ever from their influence. Jimmy helped me a lot, but I suppose there was still a lurking fear in my mind that after all they might be able to get at me in the way they profess to be able to do. Well, they did their worst and failed. The fact that they had to resort to physical violence showed that, didn't it ? "

"Of course it did. You beat them all along the line."

"Yes. I think I did. Even if they'd killed me, I should have got the best of it, really."

Suddenly she began to laugh, whilst tears induced by sheer physical weakness welled up into her eyes. "Oh, Terence, if only I could have seen them when Alessandro gave them the castor oil! It must have been a marvellous sight."

"It was. And to crown everything the Fascists turned the key in the lock before leaving the Temple. They must have had a pleasant night of it."

At that Rosamund laughed so uncontrollably that Kavanagh, fearing she might become hysterical, hastily dropped the subject and went on talking in a calm and soothing voice:

"Well, that's all over and done with. And you're not afraid of them any more."

"How could I be? I'd only have to picture them——" her voice quavered suspiciously, in a moment she might be off again in a storm of laughter.

"Rosamund," Kavanagh said seriously, "do you remember saying once, long ago, that you felt you must have no emotions. That you must not love or hate?"

She nodded. "Yes. I remember."

"Well, you don't think that any longer? Oh, darling, can't you love me now?"

There was a moment's silence. This time there were tears, not of laughter, in her eyes.

"My very valiant knight!" she said softly.

"No, only your very true and loving knight," Terence answered. And with his arms around her the terrible past vanished for ever like some evil dream.

It was arranged that Terence and Rosamund should not be married for some months and that their engagement should not even be announced for the present. For the quest on which Brandon and Kavanagh had set out was not yet ended, and nothing must be allowed to interfere with their work together.

"You belong to the country, Terence," Rosamund said firmly. "You've got to save that before we think of our own happiness."

And though he demurred, Kavanagh knew in his heart that Rosamund was right. Once married his first thoughts would be for her, and he must give his whole mind to the cause.

Now they were back in London Brandon and Kavanagh found themselves confronted by fresh problems of a complicated kind. Their investigations on the Continent had enabled them to collect the threads of both occult and political intrigues abroad; the difficulty now was to link up these threads with contacts at home, and to find out who was pulling the strings between England and abroad. Moreover, only two members of the Zodiac had been identified—Capricornus of New York and Sagittarius of Bavaria. The remaining ten, and particularly the London member of that interesting circle, had yet to be discovered.

But where was the search to begin? Doctor Hensley, one of the principal contacts in England, was dead, Oscar Franklin still walked the earth, but he was reported in the society columns of the Press to be entertaining a house-party, including the Prime Minister, at his grouse moor in Scotland. The Frenshams were also away in the country. The Batemans were cruising in the Mediterranean. The Greenworthys were at Bath. Evidently for the moment

there was little doing.

But everything comes to him who waits, and at the beginning of October the Press announced that in view of the growing menace presented by Soviet Russia, a large anti-Bolshevist meeting was to be held in the Albert Hall, at which the leading members of the Conservative Party would be present. "Mr. Murray Bateman, M.P., the Countess of Buntingford, and General Brighorn" were to be amongst the speakers, and Mr. Oscar Franklin would take the chair.

Brandon and Kavanagh decided that it would be amusing to go and see how Capricornus acquitted himself on this occasion, when a somewhat different attitude would be required of him from the one in which they had last seen him, choking and heaving on the floor of the clinic.

The meeting was large and enthusiastic, that is to say, the boxes and the body of the hall were completely filled by an audience that needed no convincing of the evils of Bolshevism. Grey or bald heads predominated amongst the men, whilst the feminine element—except for the usual contingent of somnolent dowagers in the front rows—was largely provided by the gallant widows and elderly daughters of soldiers and sailors who can always be depended on to rally to any patriotic cause, and who make the contemptuous term of "old woman" an anomaly in days when young men shudder at the idea of putting up a fight in defence of their country.

The platform was expensively decorated with palms and chrysanthemums in pots, forming a pleasing foreground to the rows of titled or important personages who had given their support to the proceedings—two dukes, three duchesses, one or two well-known

millionaires, Mr. Bloxham, the Chief Agent of the Conservative Party, and several leading Members of Parliament. The humble workers who bore the heat and burden of the day were relegated to the upper circle. If the idea had been to illustrate the Socialists' conception of anti-Bolshevism as a class movement of the Have-Nots against the Haves, it could not have been better staged. The Communists, who constituted almost the only occupants of the gallery, would have little difficulty in providing a burlesque report to this effect for the columns of the *Daily Worker*.

The proceedings opened with an excellent speech by Mr. Oscar Franklin, deploring the apathy of the British public with regard to the Bolshevik menace, and expressing the hope that all those present would contribute generously to the collection for the new campaign of propaganda that the meeting was to inaugurate. Letters from the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, and the Archbishop of Canterbury were read aloud expressing their deep regret at their inability to be present on this auspicious occasion.

A powerful speech was delivered by General Brighorn describing the horrors of Bolshevism in terms so lurid that even the old ladies in the front rows woke up for a few moments and shivered.

Mr. Murray Bateman, M.P., in a calmer and more Parliamentary vein, explained the necessity for differentiating between Communism and Socialism, and his reminder that "we are all Socialists now" met with warm applause from a small section of his audience. The British Labour Party, he went on to say, was composed of men who could by no stretch of the imagination be suspected of Bolshevistic tendencies.

Lady Buntingford was certainly extremely well

documented, and read aloud statistics showing the progress of the second Five Years' Plan, which however, she added, was doomed to failure. ("Then why worry about it?" shouted a Communist from the gallery, who was instantly silenced.) Her figures were remarkably correct as well indeed they might be, since they had already been published in the *Pravda* and passed on to her in translation by a most charming and well-informed Russian who had been presented to her at a party, and who kindly offered to supply her with all the propaganda she might require.

A star turn followed in the shape of a speech in somewhat halting English by a victim of the Russian Revolution, Madame Krapotsky, whose markedly Asiatic features seemed vaguely familiar to Brandon and Kavanagh.

"I can't think where on earth I've seen her, can you?" whispered the former.

"No, but it's coming back to me—wait, Jimmy—ah! I've got it! The woman we saw going out of the gate of the Villa Pax Mundi—the typical revolutionary female you called her—do you remember?"

"By Jove. Of course. You've got it. I wonder what she's doing in England."

They were soon to know. Madame Krapotsky, the Chairman informed the meeting, was to be employed as translator by the movement. They were fortunate in securing the services of this accomplished lady.

The meeting, everyone agreed as the audience streamed out, had been a brilliant success. The collecting plates had been returned piled with notes, and the well-known soap magnate, Mr. Schutzheim, had sent up a cheque of £1,000 to the platform.

The Communist hecklers on the whole had behaved

remarkably well, and after emitting a few cat-calls had subsided into silence. After all there seemed no reason for creating a disturbance and risking ejection by the stewards. Not a word had been said that could damage the Bolshevik cause in the eyes of anyone not already convinced of its iniquities.

Going out into the foggy atmosphere of the October night, Kavanagh found himself suddenly confronted by Myra Greenworthy. They had not met since the somewhat painful scene in the garden of her father's house, but Myra evidently harboured no resentment, for she smiled up at Kavanagh and said mischievously :

"What *did* you think of it all, Terence ? "

"I thought it most impressive," Kavanagh answered firmly, duly noting that General Brighorn was standing at his elbow.

Myra put her head nearer and whispered :

"Did you see Izzy ? "

"No. Was he on the platform ? "

Myra laughed. "I think even Izzy could hardly do that."

Kavanagh remembered hearing that young Franklin had not achieved his father's popularity with "the Party," that in fact he was reported to hold "advanced views," and was believed to have frequently visited Soviet Russia. But before he could make any reply Myra had nodded good night and was whirled away in Sir Paul Greenworthy's luxurious Mercédès in the direction of Kensington Palace Gardens.

A few nights later Brandon and Kavanagh were sitting over the fire in the latter's rooms, when the manservant entered to say that a lady was at the door and wished to see the Major.

"What sort of a lady?" asked Kavanagh.

"Young, sir, and wearing a handsome fur coat. Seems to be a bit upset, sir."

Kavanagh rose and went to the door. On the threshold stood Myra Greenworthy, evidently in a state bordering on hysteria.

"Come in, Myra," he said; "what on earth's the matter?"

The girl entered hurriedly. Kavanagh led her into the sitting-room and introduced Brandon. "The famous portrait-painter, you know."

"I want to speak to you alone," she said in a trembling voice, turning to Kavanagh.

"But, Myra, Captain Brandon's my greatest pal and as wise as an owl. If you're in any difficulties he's the man to help you," said Kavanagh, determined that if any revelations were to be made Jimmy should be there to hear them.

"Well, if he can be depended upon not to talk—what I've come to tell you is terribly secret, you understand?"

"Jimmy won't say a word. Go on, Myra."

Myra hesitated. Then the words came out with a rush:

"Oh, Terence, I believe Father's in some dreadful danger."

"How can Sir Paul be in danger?" asked Kavanagh, puzzled.

"That's what I wondered." Suddenly Myra's eyes filled with tears. "You know what Father has been to me—since Leopold died and Mother was taken ill."

Kavanagh nodded. He remembered hearing that Myra's brother had been killed in the war and that

her mother had gone mad with grief.

"But though Father and I are such friends," Myra went on, "he doesn't confide in me about his affairs. And lately he has seemed terribly worried about something. I couldn't find out what. Only he seemed always worse when Oscar or Isidore Franklin had been with him. I concluded it must be something to do with business.

"One day Oscar Franklin came and was shut up with Father in the library for ever so long. I was in the morning-room opening out of it, you know, and I could hear their voices through the door, as if they were arguing, and here and there I could hear a word, sometimes English, sometimes German. Then at last I heard Oscar Franklin say in a loud angry voice: 'Very well, Paul; then you are a traitor. You know that by rights you should have taken your place in the Zodiac, and that all together we should rule the world. Now that place will have to be given to another.' 'I can't help that,' Father said helplessly, and I could hear him pacing to and fro over the parquet. For a moment there was silence, then Father said loudly: 'I tell you, Issachar,'—Issachar, you see, is Oscar's real name—'I tell you, I once felt just as you do about this country, but I've come to love it. I don't want to see it go under. After all, my boy died fighting for it.' I couldn't hear what Franklin said to this, but it must have been some sort of sneer, for it seemed to send Father almost mad. 'You dare to call him that?' he shouted, 'my son, my first-born!' And it seemed to me that he was making a rush at Franklin. I was so frightened of what might happen that I opened the door and went in.

"Father and Franklin stood and stared at me

aghast. Then Franklin turned to me and said with bitter sarcasm : ' I congratulate you, Myra, on your father's patriotism. A true Englishman ! ' With that he turned on his heel and left the room.

" Father was white and shaken, but he would say nothing of what had taken place. Since then he has hardly eaten anything, and sits for hours sunk in silence brooding over something. And I watch him and tremble, for I fear their vengeance. That is why I came to you, Terence ; I felt I must tell someone or I should go mad." And sinking her head into the cushions of the chair Myra burst into passionate sobs.

" Stop, Myra," said Kavanagh soothingly, patting her shoulder as he had done that night in the garden ; " don't give way to despair. We've got to do something."

" What can we do ? " asked Myra, sitting up and looking at him through her tears. " We are powerless. They are too strong for us."

" Who are too strong for us ? " asked Brandon quietly.

" The Zodiac—whatever that may be."

" You never heard of it before ? "

" Only once. That was when I came into the room one day and found Father going through some papers at his writing-table. One of these was headed ' The Zodiac,' and underneath was what looked like a list of names and curious symbols. But when Father saw me he hastily put it away. He has some secret papers that he keeps in a hiding-place of his own—not in his writing desk or despatch-box, to which his secretary has access, and he allows no one to see those papers but himself. I conclude the one about the Zodiac is put away amongst them."

" And you've no idea what the Zodiac is ? "

" I imagined it must be some sort of financial combine. But I think now it's more important than that—and more secret. I think," and Myra lowered her voice mysteriously, " it's some terrible conspiracy which Father knows about, but won't be drawn into. Izzy, you see, is a Communist ; I believe he's in the very thick of the Bolshevist conspiracy. By the way, he hates *you*, Terence ! "

" Me ? What have I done to Izzy ? "

" Well, you remember that evening in the garden last summer, when—when—I—— " blushing faintly, Myra ended the sentence with a nervous laugh.

" Yes, I remember. You were feeling rather overwrought. Go on, Myra."

" And you remember too that we heard a bird in the bushes behind the summer-house ? "

Kavanagh nodded.

" Well, that bird was Izzy ! " said Myra, laughing this time outright. " The little wretch had followed us out into the garden and was hiding behind the summer-house, where he heard the whole of our conversation. Just the sort of sneaky thing Izzy would do ! So you can imagine he's no love for you, Terence. You see," she went on, turning to Brandon, " it had been arranged I should marry Izzy, and what he heard that night showed him what I felt about the question. And now he hates Terence with a deadly hatred."

" Has he got a two-seater Bentley ? " Kavanagh enquired with apparent irrelevance.

" Yes. Why do you ask ? "

" Only because a car of that make nearly ran me down as I was walking home that evening."

" Ah, I'll bet it was Izzy's ! His car is a Bentley."

He was driving himself, I remember, that evening, and he left directly after you did. Oh!" Myra added uncontrollably, "if only we could get Izzy arrested!"

Once safe in gaol, she was evidently reflecting, any matrimonial intentions on the part of Isidore would be effectually thwarted.

"I don't know what we could get him on," Kavanagh said meditatively.

"If we could track him to some Communist haunt," Myra began. Then fumbling in her gold bag she drew out a scrap of very crumpled paper. "I wonder whether this means anything?" she said, handing it to Kavanagh. "It fell out of Izzy's pocket the other day, and I picked it up. I thought it might be useful."

Kavanagh read it and passed it on to Brandon. Only these words were written on it:

"Cosmos 11 o'clock."

"But there's something on the other side," said Myra.

Brandon turned it over and read: "'The night is fine. And the stars are shining.' What on earth can that mean?"

"Odd," said Kavanagh. "You've no idea what Cosmos is, Myra? Is it a person or a place?"

"I haven't a notion."

"It might be Izzy's barber," Brandon suggested with a laugh. "Anyhow, let's look up the name in the Telephone Directory."

But no Cosmos was registered in its columns.

"If it's a place, it's evidently not a resort that wants to advertise its existence," said Brandon, adding: "Which makes it all the more interesting."

"And therefore worth following up," said Kavanagh. "I'll do all I can, Myra."

He was careful to use the first person singular. It would be imprudent to let the girl know of Brandon's activities outside his studio.

Myra, now evidently restored to her normal cheerfulness, rose to go. The thought of getting a line on Izzy seemed to exhilarate her.

"I'm so glad you'll *do* something," she said, pulling her mink coat around her shoulders.

"And if you could find out a little more about the Zodiac," Brandon said with well-affected detachment, "it might perhaps be useful."

"If only I could get hold of that list!" Myra answered, looking enquiringly at Kavanagh. "Do you think that would help, Terence?"

"Help? I should think it would help!" And less cautious than Brandon, Kavanagh put his hand on Myra's shoulder and said impressively: "Myra, you must do your level best to get that paper!"

He had gauged the girl's psychology better than Brandon, knowing as Brandon did not, the emotions he had stirred in her heart. For Kavanagh's sake she was ready to do and dare anything.

"Very well, Terence, if you say so, I'll get it—by fair means or foul." Her eyes flashed with determination. And pressing Kavanagh's hand she moved to the door.

"It's an ugly business," Brandon said after the flat door had closed behind her. "I'm afraid old Greenworthy's for it. The orders of the Zodiac are not to be lightly disobeyed."

"If only we could get Isidore rounded up," said Kavanagh, "we might put a spoke in their wheel. I

have a feeling that if there's any dirty work to be done, he's the man for it."

"Yes. And the first step is to find out who or what is Cosmos. I'll get on to that straight away."

During the course of his "double life" Brandon had had occasion to make many strange friends in all walks of life. Newspaper boys, flower-sellers, rag and bone men, had all in turn served their purpose when information was to be gleaned from the circles in which they moved, and none of them would have recognised in Captain Brandon, the society portrait painter, the odd-looking man in the dirty felt hat and shabby overcoat who had entered into conversation with them at street corners or at the bar in public-houses. Some of them doubtless suspected the fellow was a police "nark," or in the employ of some detective agency, but the half-crowns that he fished out of his trouser pocket were always welcome, and no questions need be asked as to the use made of the news they supplied. In this way Brandon had collected a small army of investigators upon whom he could depend when anything in what is known as "low life" had to be discovered.

One of the strangest of this army was Sally Wicks. Brandon had made her acquaintance some years ago when, going along one of the by-streets out of Shaftesbury Avenue late at night, he came upon a brawl going on outside the door of a public-house. The central figure, a girl whose profession was clearly stamped on her face, was shrinking back in terror from the advances of a half-caste, obviously drunk, who reeled before her on the pavement, whilst a small crowd stood round and jeered. Brandon, pushing his

way amongst them, had taken in the situation at a glance and rescued the wretched woman from her tormentor. After that night he had often passed her in the street, when she never failed to give him a wan smile and word of greeting. One evening, moved by pity, he had taken Sally into an Italian restaurant and given her a meal. The warmth of the place and human sympathy loosed her tongue, and she talked of her life, her troubles, and what might have been, for she had once had visions of better things. She had her loyalties, too.

In the course of further meetings Brandon discovered that the Royal Family occupied a peculiar place in her affections. He had come upon her during the King's illness in 1929, standing in the crowd around Buckingham Palace with the tears welling between her blackened eyelids and making grimy channels in the rouge of her cheeks. This suggested possibilities, and Brandon took to employing her for little jobs. Owing to the fact that she looked so plainly what she was she could penetrate into places where a respectable woman would be regarded with suspicion and where useful information was sometimes to be obtained. Brandon found he could trust her too, and, though he remained Mr. Peters to her, she became one of the few to whom he disclosed something of the true nature of his investigations. Communism in itself meant nothing to her, but the insults to the Royal Family uttered by Communist orators roused her to fury and nerved her to undertake any enterprise for their undoing, however hazardous. The money she earned in this way counted for little compared to the glory of feeling she was working for the King.

A day or two after Myra's visit to Kavanagh's flat,

Brandon, crossing Piccadilly Circus towards midnight, found himself face to face with Sally Wicks.

"Sally," he said, "would you like to do a job of work?"

"Wouldn't I just? Anything to do with those b—— Reds?"

"Yes. I want you to find out, if you can, who or what is 'Cosmos.' Here, I'll write it down for you." And he handed her a slip of paper.

Sally looked at it and screwed up her nose.

"Sounds nasty, don't it, dearie? How do I set to work?"

"Better drop in for a meal at some of the small restaurants in Soho, and see if you can pick up anything," Brandon said, slipping a pound note into her hand.

"Right-o. I'll see what I can do, Mr. Peters. Same address as usual?"

And with a nod she disappeared into the crowd.

The address was that of Rigby's sister, who kept a small sweet shop in Chelsea. Four days later a letter duly arrived there addressed to Mr. Peters in Sally's sprawling hand. It was short and to the point:

"I've found out what it is. Its a restarrong. Don't know where yet but hope to soon. I'll be by the Palace tomorrow evening at seven."

Brandon, impatient for further news, kept the rendezvous in Shaftesbury Avenue. Sally, her face aglow with triumph, was waiting for him.

"It's in Pond Street. Got it out of a waiter at Bonino's, where I dropped in last night. Spaniard he was, I should say; seemed a chatty sort of fellow, so I

just said: ' Know Cosmos?' Looked a bit queer, told me where it was. So I thought I'd step that way and have a look. There it was large as life."

" What's it like ? "

" Oh, a beastly hole! " Sally said, making a face.

" Well, if you don't mind, I think we'll go and have a meal there."

" Right-o. This evening ? "

" Yes, I'll be back here at eleven."

At the appointed hour Brandon, in the guise of a German Communist, joined Sally near the Palace and followed as she led the way to Pond Street. After passing a small Kosher restaurant they came to a sign with the words " Café Cosmos " written in small lettering over a circle with a point in the middle.

Opening the door they entered a long room with no tables but a bar at the end, behind which sat a man of swarthy appearance smoking a thin Spanish cigar and reading the *Moscow News*. Putting down the paper he looked at the new arrivals enquiringly and not without suspicion.

" Good evening, comrade," said Brandon, speaking English with a well-assumed German accent.

The man at the desk returned the greeting gruffly and then added as if expecting a reply :

" The night is fine."

Where had Brandon heard these words recently ? Suddenly remembering the note on Izzy's scrap of paper, he answered with only an instant's hesitation :

" And the stars are shining."

" That was last week," said the man at the desk.

" Where are you from ? "

" From Hamburg. The comrades there told me I

should be welcome here." And Brandon produced a card of membership to the K.P.D. in the name of Otto Schmidt.

The man looked reassured.

"Good. But they should have kept you up to date. And your companion?"

"An Englishwoman. A friend, but not yet one of ours."

"Then she can't come in."

Brandon looked at Sally, who immediately understood.

"All right," she said, nodding. "Good night, Mr. Schmidt, see you another evening." And moving to the door, she went out into the street.

"You can go through now, comrade," said the man, jerking his head in the direction of a door at the side of the desk.

Brandon entered and found himself in a back room, where some dozen men and women were seated at small tables evidently more engrossed in conversation than in the meagre refreshments placed before them by a girl with short black hair brushed straight back from her forehead, wearing a greasy scarlet blouse.

The assembled company looked at Brandon enquiringly as he sat down at an empty table in the corner and asked for a glass of vodka.

After a moment's silence the conversation was resumed again in low voices and in a variety of languages—Spanish, German, Yiddish, and Russian. Brandon could catch only a few words here and there—"capitalism—the bourgeois—tovarisch," the usual phraseology of Communism.

"You are a stranger," said the girl in the red blouse, putting the vodka down before Brandon, and he felt

that the rest of the company were listening for his reply.

"Yes, I have only just arrived in London. I'm from Hamburg."

"Ach so?" said a man sitting near him. "And how are things going there?"

"Badly," answered Brandon briefly. For the moment, he decided, the less he said the better.

The man, after a few desultory remarks, turned again to his companions, leaving Brandon to consume his vodka in silence. After a while he got up and went out. The evening had yielded little, but one visit could not be expected to lead to anything of interest. It was evidently necessary to become an habitu .

"One can come again, comrade?" he said, as he went out to the man at the desk, who nodded assent.

After this Brandon took to dropping in every few nights and was soon on friendly though not confidential terms with his neighbours. No longer curious as to his identity, they seemed to have decided that he was a comrade of little importance. But their voices were now raised at moments so that Brandon could catch interesting fragments of conversation.

"But the English, what can one do with them?" said one in Yiddish. "A wooden-headed race. They will never make a revolution."

"No," said another, "that is why we've got to make it for them. By the spring you'll see—things will begin to happen——" and the speaker's voice sank into a whisper.

Another time a discussion was taking place in Russian. "But Welsky, he is their mascot," said a voice, and Brandon listened with all his ears, for "Prinz Welsky" is Russian for the Prince of Wales.

Again the conversation became inaudible. Then someone said in a louder tone: "But, Mangin, that was simple, he attended a banquet."

Of what followed only one word could be heard. That word was "pneumonia." Brandon duly noted it on the tablets of his memory.

One evening a curious incident occurred. A group of five men occupying a table in the corner had been doing themselves better than usual and were talking with unaccustomed freedom in Yiddish. Suddenly one of them put on his hat and began to mutter what sounded like a prayer in a language unknown to Brandon.

"But surely, Jakov," said a young man—a newcomer—in evident surprise, "as a Communist you do not believe in religion? Then why do you recite the Schema?"

"You fool," retorted the other, "what is Communism to us? Don't you know it is only the means by which we mean to attain the mastery of the world?"

The others nodded assent, and the young man relapsed into silence.

Two points Brandon remarked as of particular interest. One was that none of the leaders of the British Communist Party with whose faces he was perfectly familiar were to be seen here. Evidently they were not in the inner councils of the movement—"Dummkopfe" he heard them once referred to in the course of a conversation.

The second point was that the phraseology employed by these people had nothing of the occult ring noticeable in the correspondence he had gone through at Bogazzo. The Zodiac was never mentioned, nor were any classical pseudonyms employed; the language, in

fact, was that of pure Communism. Brandon judged that these people formed an inner circle for carrying out the dictates of Moscow, but were some way removed from the Hidden Chiefs who composed the secret inner ring of the world movement.

Meanwhile, not a sign had been seen of the main object of Brandon's search—Isidore Franklin. Brandon began to wonder if he had failed to recognise him, for he had only met him once at a dinner-party carefully groomed with highly polished hair and in smart black evening clothes, a shirt front straight from the Rue de la Paix, and a large cabochon ruby gleaming on his little finger. This was certainly not the get-up in which he would be likely to visit Cosmos, and Brandon kept his eyes open for a camouflaged edition of that enterprising young man. Then one night when Brandon had stayed later than usual and was preparing to get up from his table in a corner of the room, the door opened, and a new "comrade" entered. This time there could be no doubt it was "Izzy," in spite of the shabby black coat, the voluminous red tie, the felt hat well pulled down to his eyes, which were concealed by a pair of thick black spectacles. It was certainly not the spruce and opulent Izzy of West-End dinner-tables, but it was Izzy all the same, and on the little finger of his right hand he still wore the large cabochon ruby.

His entrance appeared to create no small stir amongst the habitués of Cosmos, for several rose respectfully and made room for him at a table.

"Things are going well," he said in German, sitting down with his back to Brandon, who, from the movement of his shoulders, guessed that he was taking something from an inner pocket of his coat.

Turning from one to another of the group, Izzy spoke in short sharp sentences :

" You have worked well, Reuben Aaronovitch," or " Yasha Jidovski, your work has not been entirely satisfactory. You must show more energy in future." And so on.

" He is distributing money," Brandon said to himself, though the shoulders of the group were pressed too closely together for him to see what was taking place on the table. Each man received Izzy's remarks and, presumably, the notes handed to him, humbly as coming from a superior, though one or two grumbled about the difficulty of making headway here.

" What can one do in London, the stronghold of Capitalism ? " said one, louder than the rest.

Brandon sipped his vodka thoughtfully. So Izzy was the intermediary between the Zodiac and the inner circle of the foreign Communists in London, passing on to them the funds provided by that mysterious source of wealth which financed all phases of the world movement in turn.

At this moment Izzy rose to go, and on his way to the door spotted Brandon in the far corner of the room.

" Who is that fellow ? " he asked, stopping suddenly with a gesture in Brandon's direction.

" He is a German comrade," answered one of the group. " He comes here often."

" Have you asked him for his proofs ? " demanded Isidore.

" Pedro admitted him, so he must have given the word."

" Well, let him give it now ! You have fared well ? " he added, turning to Brandon, and evidently waiting for a reply.

"Excellently," said Brandon, saying the first thing that came into his head.

"That is not the answer."

"But, comrade, I did not know that a new pass-word was necessary each time one came here. I understood that all comrades were welcome."

"Of course. But you should have been able to answer that," said Isidore peremptorily.

Brandon was now completely at a loss. With the higher initiates such as Brinkdorff and Oscar Franklin it had been easier to get out of the situation with masonic grips and pass-words, but at Cosmos something else was needed—evidently a pass-word, that was changed weekly. He had not anticipated this situation; usually this kind of test formed the prelude to admission, once that Rubicon had been passed he had concluded that no direct challenge of the kind would be offered. But Isidore Franklin was evidently more vigilant than his companions; moreover, the transactions of that evening demanded greater secrecy than the desultory conversation that went on at Cosmos. Brandon's failure to give the required pass-word therefore roused him to furious suspicion.

"Call in Pedro!" he said to the comrade at the door.

The order was obeyed, and the sullen bar-keeper entered the room.

"What did you mean by admitting this fellow without the proper tests?" he said in German.

"But he answered nearly right the first evening. And he showed his card of membership to the K.P.D."

"Nearly right is not enough. And he cannot answer now. Show your card of membership," he went on, turning to Brandon, who produced it from an inner pocket.

Isidore looked at it critically.

"Who knows whether this is genuine? For all we can tell the fellow is an impostor, a spy of the British Secret Service. However, we shall soon find out. He will appear before the G.P.U. and prove himself—if he is able."

"Decidedly troublesome," Brandon thought to himself, for he well knew the impossibility of escaping from the room with the steel doors which formed the London branch of the Cheka, now more euphoniously renamed the G.P.U. Determined not to be captured without a struggle, he made a dash for the exit, but half a dozen men closed around him and he was overpowered.

Isidore stood by issuing his commands:

"Morris, place a gag over the fellow's mouth. Reuben, pinion his arms behind his back and lead him to the door. My car is waiting a little farther up the street. Summon Maimun to come up to the door and push him into the car as quickly as possible."

The order was instantly obeyed. Brandon felt himself seized from behind, his arms bound tightly with a leather belt that one of the comrades removed from his own body, a handkerchief was stuffed into his mouth and another tied across it and knotted at the back of his head. Then he was led through the bar to the entrance, where the car, driven by Franklin's negro chauffeur, waited.

But just as he was being hurried across the pavement a sudden pandemonium arose, and Brandon found himself the centre of a struggling crowd, blows rained like hail on the heads of his captors, Isidore dashed through the open door of the car and was driven rapidly away. The next moment Brandon felt his arms released, the

gag torn from his mouth, friendly hands gripped his, whilst Sally, with her arms round his neck, was kissing him soundly on both cheeks.

From the moment Brandon had taken to frequenting Cosmos, Sally had lived in a state of acute anxiety. "Mr. Peters," the strange man in the shabby overcoat was what the "Confession Books" called her "greatest hero in real life." Not only had he come to her rescue that night several years ago like the knight in a story book saving a damsel in distress, but he was the only man who had ever shown her any human sympathy and given her honourable work to do, the work that above all other raised her in her own eyes as being performed in the service of the King. If "anything happened" to Mr. Peters all that side of Sally's sordid life would be at an end. And in going alone to Cosmos she felt convinced that he was running a terrible risk. In vain she had begged him to take a companion with him, but, as he had pointed out, no one unprovided with the necessary credentials would be able to gain admittance. He alone was capable of carrying the thing through. But Sally determined not to leave things to chance. If Mr. Peters would not take care of himself she would see to his safety. It happened that she had a lover amongst the young fish-porters in Billingsgate, some of whom were as loyal as herself. Hatred of the alien ran high in the minds of these men, and it was as aliens that they loathed the Communists who frequented that part of London. It was therefore to Bill Hodgett that Sally confided her fears for the safety of Mr. Peters when he took to frequenting Cosmos, and thus, unknown to Brandon, every night that he had spent there, Sally with Bill and several of his

heftiest mates had wandered round the restaurant, keeping guard on the entrance and never returning home until they had seen " Mr. Peters " emerge safely from the doorway.

Bill and his band were therefore all ready when, on the fateful evening Brandon, gagged and bound, was seen in the act of being hustled into the waiting motor and the opportunity for a scrap with the alien Reds gave them no less satisfaction than the rescue of Sally's hero, Mr. Peters. They would have liked to pursue them and get in a few more punches as bruised and battered they took to their heels in all directions, but a word from Brandon brought them to a halt. So far the whole affair had happened so quickly that neither the police nor a curious crowd had been attracted to the spot, and " Mr. Peters," having thanked his rescuers with a warm handshake all round and a " Good night, Sally ; God bless you," was able to slip away unobserved from the scene of action.

It was the proudest moment of Sally's life. Those words " God bless you " echoed in her ears as she made her way homewards, walking as if to the strains of a triumphal march.

Once out of danger, Brandon, as was his wont, put his personal experiences at Cosmos out of his mind, and set to work on the clues he had collected there. It was not till a week later that the circumstances of his rescue were suddenly recalled to his memory. He had entered a train on the District Railway and picked up the evening paper when a small paragraph caught his eye.

" Sarah Wicks, aged 27, of no occupation, was found stabbed to the heart last night in a passage leading off

Pond Street, Covent Garden. A young Russian, Reuben Aaronsohn, seen in the vicinity, was detained by the police, but released for lack of evidence connecting him with the crime. The matter is in the hands of Scotland Yard."

Brandon put down the paper with a spasm of impotent fury at these miserable things being possible in a civilised country. So Sally had paid for his life with her own! Nothing had ever touched him so poignantly in the course of his adventurous career.

CHAPTER XIII

A KENSINGTON TRAGEDY

WHILST these events had been taking place Myra was passing through alternating moments of hope and despair. Her father's depression seemed to be growing deeper, and she dreaded he might be driven to some desperate deed. But at the same time she had faith in Kavanagh, for she was convinced that Isidore was in some way connected with the trouble weighing on her father's mind ; once Izzy had been rounded up she felt the danger that threatened him would be averted. Meanwhile, she had her own work to do. She could still feel the touch of Kavanagh's hand on her shoulders and his voice, with that light suspicion of a brogue, saying : " Myra, you must do your level best to get that paper ! " Well, she would find its hiding-place—show what she was able to do for him, then Terence would love her and all would be well.

One evening Kavanagh, sitting over the fire in his rooms with Brandon, heard the telephone bell ring and took up the receiver. A startled look came over his face.

" What is it ? " said Brandon.

" A most extraordinary sound—the sound of laboured breathing—coming in gasps—who is it ? " Kavanagh said quickly, speaking into the receiver.

Still the same gasping sound.

" Who is it ? " he repeated.

Then a voice said faintly :

"It's—it's—My—My—Myra——"

"Myra! What's the matter?"

A pause followed, then the same gasping whisper said:

"Come—come—quickly. I'm—dying."

The last word was almost inaudible. Then complete silence followed.

"Good Lord!" said Kavanagh. "What can have happened? Jimmy! We've got to get busy, come on."

Followed by Brandon, to whom he rapidly explained what he had heard, Kavanagh ran into the hall and flung on his overcoat. Hurrying downstairs the two men hailed a taxi, telling the chauffeur to drive with all speed to Kensington Palace Gardens. Fortunately, the streets at this hour were clear, and they arrived in less than ten minutes at their destination.

"Is Miss Greenworthy ill?" said Kavanagh to the footman who opened the door—an intelligent-looking young man whom Kavanagh remembered as "Albert," and who gave him a quick look of recognition. The man looked surprised.

"Not that I know of, sir. She's in the library, I believe, with Sir Paul—at least, she was about twenty minutes ago. If you'll come this way, sir," and he led the way through the hall and opened the library door.

At first the room appeared to be empty. The dim light from one electric reading-lamp left the corners in almost complete darkness. The heavy, rather delicious perfume Kavanagh remembered noticing that evening in the garden hung in the air.

"Is there no one here?" he said, going forward, and even as he spoke he suddenly saw through the shadows at the farther end of the room two forms lying prostrate on the floor.

"Sir Paul and Myra!" he said under his breath.
"And they're dead."

The three men approached quickly. Yes, there could be no doubt about it. That was Sir Paul, his eyes closed in death, with a round hole in his temple from which the blood was slowly trickling, and an old Browning pistol lying close to his right hand. Myra too seemed to have ceased breathing, but no wound was visible, only on examining her blue velvet gown a dull red stain over the left breast was visible. Beside her, overturned on the floor, was the telephone which she had evidently pulled down from the table near at hand in order to breathe her last words to Terence.

Throwing himself on his knees beside her, Kavanagh put his hand on hers; it was still warm, and the pulse was very feebly beating.

"She's not dead yet," he whispered. "Fetch some brandy—quick!"

Albert, who had remained rooted to the ground with terror, awoke as from a dream, and hurrying from the room returned with a glass of brandy. Brandon had knelt down on the other side of Myra and gently held her lips apart as Kavanagh with one arm beneath her head poured the liquid between them.

At first she did not move, then after a while she gave a shuddering sigh and opened her eyes.

"Terence," she whispered.

"Yes, Myra, what has happened?"

"Father did it—he found—out—I had—spoken——" she said in the same gasping whisper that had sounded through the telephone, pausing between each word. "He was——" and her voice failed her.

"He was what, Myra?" said Brandon, determined to obtain what evidence he could before it was too late.

For his practised eye told him that Myra had only a few moments to live.

"Afraid—of—their—their vengeance."

And her eyes closed again.

"That's the end," Brandon said softly.

But it was not quite the end. Once more Myra opened her eyes, and looking straight into Kavanagh's smiled faintly. Then, as if with a superhuman effort, she whispered :

"Ta—tal—talisman !"

Her eyes closed again, another shuddering sigh broke from her lips, and she lay still with Kavanagh's arms around her.

"It's all over, Terence," said Brandon, rising. And turning to the footman, he added : "Run out and get a policeman as quick as you can. We'll stay here till he comes."

As soon as Albert returned Brandon said to him :

"Have you any idea how all this happened ?"

"None, sir. Only the master's not been himself for some time. Seemed as if he had something on his mind. And this evening, when he came back from the City, he seemed more upset than usual. Hardly touched his dinner, sat looking at his plate without speaking. I could see Miss Myra was worried about him. Afterwards, when they'd gone into the library, I was passing the door and heard him talking aloud—shouting if I might say so, sir—as if he was going for Miss Myra about something. There seemed to be a regular row going on, so to speak."

"You heard nothing that he said ?"

"I'm not given to listening, sir."

"No, but if he was talking so loud you might have heard something without listening," said Brandon.

"Come on, Albert, tell us what you know. It's really important."

"It's not for me to speak, sir."

"Yes, it is—if you can throw any light on the matter."

Albert hesitated and then said:

"Well, sir, it was only a few words. I heard the master say angrily: 'You have spoken! You can't deny it!' And Miss Myra cried out: 'It was to save you. I knew you were in danger. I couldn't stand by and see you threatened!' That seemed to send him almost mad. He raged up and down the room shouting: 'You've ruined me. You've ruined me! They'll take their revenge.'"

"Was that all, Albert?"

"Yes, sir, after that I went back to the pantry. It's a good way from the library, you understand, sir. One can't hear nothing there that goes on in this part of the house."

"And you've no idea what was troubling Sir Paul?"

"Well, sir, I hardly like to say."

"Yes, speak out, Albert. We won't give you away. What do you think was the matter?"

Sinking his voice to a confidential whisper, Albert said:

"I should say that it's all along of Mr. Oscar Franklin or his son Mr. Isidore—the master always seemed worse when he'd been with them," and the man's face took on a sudden look of hatred.

"You don't like Mr. Isidore?"

"No, sir, I don't, and that's a fact. Always nosing into everything, if you understand what I mean, sir."

"Perfectly," nodded Brandon. "What you've told us is very useful, Albert."

By this time the police had arrived and began to take

copious notes of the affair. It was soon evident that Sir Paul Greenworthy had shot his daughter through the heart and then turned the weapon on himself. As to the motive of the double crime that was a matter for speculation. "Did Miss Greenworthy say nothing more to this effect?" asked the police. Yes, she had said: "He was afraid of their vengeance." The phrase was duly noted in their pocket-books. This was as much as was necessary for them to know, and the enquiry being ended, Brandon and Kavanagh left by permission of the police. But before going out into the night Brandon contrived to slip his card and a pound note into Albert's hand, saying in an undertone:

"Good night, Albert. You'll be wanting a drop of something to pull you round after all this. Here's my address and telephone number in case you may have anything to communicate. You understand?" he added significantly.

"Perfectly, sir," the man answered with a quick look of intelligence.

"I think Albert may be useful to us," Brandon said as they made their way home through the darkness. "He seems to know more than he'll say at present. It's just as well to keep in touch with him."

"Yes," Kavanagh answered in an abstracted voice. For the moment he could not get his mind back on to the track of investigation; the horror of the tragedy they had just witnessed was still close around him. He had looked death in the face often during the war, but to Terence, always tender where women were concerned, this seemed different. Myra, poor Myra, always so full of life and gaiety, had died in his arms. This thought occupied him to the exclusion of all other considerations. But after a while as he went over the

scene again in his mind her last words of all recurred to him, and he broke a long silence by saying :

" By the way, Jimmy, what do you think Myra meant by ' talisman ' ? "

" I've been wondering about that myself. She must have meant something—something important, too. Her mind wasn't wandering, poor girl! But I can't imagine what she did mean."

" Do you think she carried a talisman on her she wanted us to have ? "

" It's possible. We may find out through the servants. I've a feeling we're not at the end of the mystery."

They had not long to wait for further developments. The next night at two o'clock in the morning the telephone bell at Brandon's bedside rang.

" It's Albert, sir," said a voice.

" Yes, what is it ? "

" I think you and Major Kavanagh had better come along at once, sir. There's some men in the house—not ordinary burglars, you understand, sir. If you could come round to the back door I'd let you in quietly and take them by surprise."

" Good. We'll be round immediately."

Quickly ringing up Kavanagh, Brandon threw on his clothes and taxied rapidly to Kensington Palace Gardens, arriving there almost at the same moment as his friend. Albert, advancing on tiptoe, opened the back door noiselessly.

" They're in the library," he said in an undertone, " going through the master's papers, I suspect. There were some he kept very secret, you understand, sir."

" Ah, and have you any idea who the men are ? "

" Mr. Isidore Franklin and some of his lot, if I'm not

mistaken. They got in through the billiard-room window where the latch was broken. Only Mr. Isidore would know that, for he heard the master giving orders for it to be repaired."

"Good. We'll go straight for them," said Brandon. And walking to the library door they threw it boldly open.

Albert was right. At the writing desk beside a carefully shaded light sat Isidore Franklin turning over a mass of papers, whilst his two men were engaged in pulling out drawers and evidently hunting desperately for some missing document.

"May I ask what you people are doing here?" said Kavanagh.

Isidore sprang to his feet as if he had been shot, but quickly recovering his composure, he answered in his usual derisive tone:

"If it comes to that, what are *you* doing here?"

"We came because we heard the house had been broken into. Now we find you are the burglar."

"Yes, I am the burglar," Isidore said calmly, and signing to his men to leave the room he took up his stand on the hearthrug and lit a cigarette. It was evident that he entirely failed to identify Brandon with Otto Schmidt of Cosmos. Albert discreetly retired, leaving Kavanagh and Brandon to deal with the situation.

"Yes," Isidore repeated, "I am the burglar. I was looking for something amongst Greenworthy's papers. What are you going to do about it?"

"Call in the police."

"Capital. And what do you suppose they will do?"

"Arrest you for feloniously entering this house," said Kavanagh.

"I think they would find that more difficult than you imagine," Isidore said with an enigmatic smile.

And in the same cool voice he went on :

"Perhaps you think they could get me on some other count ? For my Communist activities, for example ? Oh yes, Major Kavanagh, I know that as a candidate of the Conservative Party you must be interested in these questions. And from something Myra let fall one day in a moment of—shall we say petulance ?—I gathered she suspected me of Bolshevik sympathies. As Myra's dear friend and confidant," Izzy went on with a derisive bow in Kavanagh's direction, "she no doubt spoke of this to you. In that case you're probably anxious to find out more about what you call the Communist conspiracy. As I happen to be in the thick of it, there is no one who can tell you about it better than I. Is there anything you would like to ask me ? Take a cigarette," and Isidore held out a jewel-studded case with a smile.

Ignoring the outstretched hand and taking a cigarette from his own case, Kavanagh said :

"Yes. When do you propose to bring off the Revolution ? "

"The Revolution ? " Isidore answered with a shrug. "Do you really think one will be necessary ? There was a time, some ten to fifteen years ago, when Capitalism stood firm in this country and its overthrow seemed only possible by violence. But that time has passed. Lenin was right in saying that the best method was boring from within. Now that process has been accomplished, and the financial structure of this country has been shaken to its foundations, why should our people risk their lives by bombs and barricades ? Why break down an open door ? We can obtain all we want by legislation."

"This is interesting, Mr. Franklin," said Brandon, seating himself comfortably in an armchair ; "pray go on."

"Certainly. Where had I got to ? Ah, I was saying we could obtain all we want by legislation. The Labour Party are under our direction. Our pact with them is concluded. The Liberals are dominated by our people. As to the Conservatives, to which you"—smiling again at Kavanagh—"propose to attach yourself, we have our men or women in every key position behind the scenes. All that goes on in the secret councils of the Party is known to us immediately, so that we can counter every measure that is opposed to our interests. At the next election it will take its third defeat and go out once and for all."

"And what do you propose to do then ? Set up a Soviet Republic ?"

"That will depend. The same methods are not suited to every country. In Russia the Soviet system has so far answered our purpose very well. When it ceases to do so we shall replace it by another that will suit us equally. Here we shall probably start in quite a different manner."

"By taking over the banks and nationalising industry ?"

"Certainly we shall take over the banks and, as you call it, 'nationalise' industry, that is to say, run it ourselves. A great part of it is already in our hands. Your native bankers will offer no resistance, for it is on us they depend for advice, and up to the last moment they will continue to believe they still control the finances of the country."

"The people will rise against you," said Kavanagh. "You've not got mere moujiks to deal with here."

"The people! They will never rise as long as we keep them amused and fed, which we shall do until the time comes for us to take over power openly. The people dance to any tune we play for them. Already we decide what they shall eat, drink, wear, read, and listen to. The stupid public accepts what it is given by us. The cinemas are ours. The radio all over the world broadcasts our propaganda. The literary world is under our control. No writer who dares to attack us can obtain a hearing; only those who serve our purpose can hope to succeed. We arrange this success for them, for we can make any author, speaker, artist that we please. As to the Press, not one word can be printed in the newspapers that we do not approve. No editor could hold his post a day who dared to publish what is detrimental to us."

"But the Press," said Kavanagh, "constantly publishes columns against Bolshevism."

"Against Bolshevism—yes, the façade—and even then in such a way as not to injure it. Those columns merely serve to advertise the power of the Soviet Government just as the anti-Godless campaign in this country gives publicity to our propaganda by reproducing cartoons and what it calls 'blasphemies' that we could never hope to get into the Capitalist Press. But soon the Press will be absolutely ours; then we shall print everything that we please. Already we have our agents in every newspaper office, in every Government Department, in the Home Office, in Scotland Yard. Don't you understand," and Izzy's voice rose triumphantly, "don't you understand that we are already *the masters of the world!* What can you do against us?"

There was a moment's silence whilst Izzy, panting with excitement, squared his shoulders, tucked his

thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and flashed defiance at his listeners.

"As a mere matter of curiosity," Brandon said at last, taking his cigarette slowly out of his mouth, "why do you tell us all this, Mr. Franklin? It's surely somewhat indiscreet to let us into all your plans in this way?"

"Why do I tell you all this?" Isidore repeated, breaking into a derisive laugh. "For the simple reason that it doesn't matter what you know, for *you can make no use of it!*"

"Yes," he went on in the same jeering tone of triumph, "you can do what you like with the information I have given you to-night. Go to the Home Office, to Scotland Yard, to all the heads of the Secret Service, to the Prime Minister, and to the Press, and tell them what I have told you. Tell them we intend to overthrow the Monarchy and the Government of this country, to take over finally that derelict concern the British Empire, to place the banks under our control, to sweep away the last remnants of the Christianity we hate, for it is true, all this is true! But no one will believe you! We shall spread the rumour that you are mad, as we have done in the case of others who have become dangerous to us. For the power is already in our hands, and we know how to use it."

Then suddenly dropping his tone of light irony, Isidore came close up to Kavanagh, and with flashing eyes, clenched fists, and a look of malignant fury, almost spat these words into his face:

"We know also how to deal with those who dare to oppose us!"

Quick as lightning Kavanagh dealt the young man a stinging blow with his open hand which sent him

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reeling across the room. It was the action of a school-boy, he told himself the next moment, but the impulse to hit back in answer to Izzy's insolent threat had been irresistible, and he had obeyed it before he knew what he was doing. Taking a step backwards he squared his elbows to resist the counterblow which Izzy might be expected to deliver, but to his amazement a look of abject terror spread over Izzy's countenance ; for the first time he ceased to look derisive, his hands dropped to his sides, his fingers crooked nervously, then with head bent forward between his hunched shoulders he made for the door, opened it quickly, and went out.

Brandon and Kavanagh looked at each other and burst into a shout of laughter.

" Well, you've won Isidore's respect ! " said Brandon, " he'll think twice before he threatens a white man again. He forgot that you're not yet a politician to be intimidated."

" No ; it would take more than Izzy to intimidate me. Still, I'm afraid there's a certain amount of truth in what he said. We couldn't get him on what he told us to-night. He was careful, you see, not to give us any data we could go on. Now, if only we could get the list of the Zodiac of which Myra spoke that would be documentary evidence."

" Yes, but I doubt their really committing themselves by putting names on paper—in plain language at any rate. Still, Myra must have seen something written—some very secret document old Greenworthy kept amongst his most private papers. I shouldn't be surprised if those are what Izzy was hunting for to-night when we surprised him ! "

" By Jove, I never thought of that. What's more, he evidently didn't find them, so the document may be

still here somewhere—probably in the room at this moment. If only we knew where to look for it. D’you know, Jimmy,” Kavanagh went on meditatively, “I feel sure those last words of poor Myra’s had something to do with it.”

“Yes, I’ve thought that several times. But I can’t for the life of me imagine what she could mean by the talisman.”

Brandon was pacing the room as he spoke, and suddenly stopped dead in front of one of the bookshelves that ran round the library walls.

“Good Lord! I’ve had an idea. Old Greenworthy seems to have made a jolly good collection.”

“‘The hundred best books’ I should think to start with—I don’t imagine he was much of a reader.”

“No. But he’d be bound to have Walter Scott amongst them,” Brandon said, running his eye along the shelves. “Ah, yes, here we are! What about this?” and he pointed to a volume.

“*The Talisman!* By Jove, Jimmy, I quite forgot that was the name of one of Scott’s novels. Could that be what Myra meant? Haul it out quickly!”

Brandon took the book from the shelf, opened and shook it. Out from between the pages there floated a sheet of paper. He stooped quickly and picked it up.

“What is it?” Kavanagh asked breathlessly.

“A list of names—and symbols—the Zodiac!”

Yes, there could be no doubt about it. There were the twelve names, each followed by its Zodiacal symbol, together with the sphere of action assigned to each. They appeared to have been scribbled down hastily as a sort of temporary memorandum, not as a document intended for preservation. The handwriting was unmistakably that of Sir Paul Greenworthy.

"This must be the list Myra told us about," said Brandon, "and that she evidently managed to get hold of—probably the night she died. Otherwise she'd have got it to us. I expect she heard her father coming, and was afraid of being caught, so shoved it into this book for safety."

"And told us with her last breath where to find it ! Good Myra !"

"Yes. She took a big risk in pinching it. I never thought she'd really be able to get hold of anything of the kind," said Brandon.

"Because you felt sure the names would never have been put on paper ?"

"Nor would they—by the Zodiac themselves. But this list wasn't drawn up by them, it was drawn up by Greenworthy, who refused to be one of them. You notice there is an empty space in front of the sign of Taurus ? That corroborates Myra's story of the scene that took place between him and Franklin."

"Then I wonder how he managed to get hold of the list ?"

Brandon thought a moment.

"It seems to me that it may have been like this," he said slowly. "In the past Greenworthy had evidently stood in with the Zodiac. You remember what Myra heard him saying : ' I felt just as you do once, Issachar.' So no doubt they thought they could count on him. And in inviting him to take his place amongst them as their London member they must have told him who the others were. But to their surprise and fury, when it came to the point of actually joining the Zodiac and helping to bring about the downfall of the British Empire, his feeling for this country got the better of him and he backed out. They'd probably

never realised he'd do that, or they wouldn't have committed themselves. That's what made them threaten him with their vengeance."

"Lest he should give away the secret?"

"He'd hardly have dared to do that, knowing the power of the Zodiac. But having been told the names of the members he probably jotted them down afterwards on this scrap of paper for his own use, only taking the precaution to put it away in a place of safety. For though he'd refused to be one of them, he wanted to remember who they were—possibly so as to keep a watch on their movements."

"For what purpose?"

"Oh, these supermen of finance are not above spying on each other—there are hatreds and rivalries amongst them just as amongst lesser men. Even the Zodiac are probably not entirely at one, though they work together for a common end."

"I see," said Kavanagh; "and if your theory's true, Greenworthy may have taken out the list some time to remind himself who was operating in a given part of the world, and that's how Myra came to get a glimpse of it."

"Yes. Anyhow, we've got it now, and we'd better be off quickly or *we* shall be suspected of burgling."

"Which is just about what we have been doing," laughed Kavanagh. "I think another *douceur* to Albert is indicated."

But the footman, tired of waiting to show the visitors out, had sunk into a peaceful slumber on a seat in the hall, and the two men let themselves out of the house without disturbing his dreams.

CHAPTER XIV

THE END OF THE QUEST

So the great secret was disclosed at last. The list of the Zodiac, together with their spheres of "government," lay spread out on Brandon's desk. And neither he nor Kavanagh were much the wiser. For the names were mostly those of men entirely unknown to them.

Sagittarius was duly entered as Geldbeutel and Capricornus as Oscar Franklin. Virgo was seen to be Schneewald, Aries was Fuchsbein of the U.S.A., Leo was Zimarkara, whilst Cancer, "governing" the British Empire, was no other than Lord Farbenstein!

But what of Scorpio *alias* Fung Tsi Kun in the Far East? Or Pisces *alias* Simon ben Amon in Africa?—and so on. Above all, what of that other unknown name, the thirteenth, with no Zodiacal sign, placed at the top of the list, as if denoting the Sun and Head of the whole system?

"It's a bit disappointing," said Kavanagh, who had hoped for a more sensational *dénouement*.

"I don't know about that," answered Brandon. "Of course it would have been interesting if all the Twelve had turned out to be public figures we know all about. But the very fact that these men have remained wrapped in mystery adds to their importance. Remember that the unvarying rule of world revolution is that the real authors never show themselves. Look back on all the great revolutions of the past hundred

and fifty years. Who before 1789 had ever heard of Robespierre? Who before 1917 of Lenin? When revolution comes, leaders seem to spring from the ground ready armed like the dragons' teeth of Cadmus. If this is so with the visible leaders, how much more so with the secret powers behind them?"

"Still, Oscar Franklin comes out enough into the limelight."

"Yes," laughed Brandon, "as the supporter of constitutional government and purveyor of elevating films! But as you say, he does appear on the scene in some capacity instead of keeping his actual existence dark like Gemini, Libra, Aquarius, and the rest."

"Well, how do you account for that?"

"By the probability that Franklin is not one of the controlling brains of the Zodiac. He never struck me as up to Zodiac standard. A man who'd mix himself up with occultism and join the Order of the Phoenix could hardly be regarded as a superman of intellect. Geldbeutel seemed to me in a very different class. He 'kept himself to himself,' so to speak. But even he may not be one of the controlling brains."

"Then you think that all the Zodiac are not supermen?"

"Not intellectually. If my theory's right, the Zodiac is divided into the four trigons of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. And Capricornus of New York, *alias* Franklin, is in the trigon of Earth. So are Taurus of London and Virgo of Schneewald. Presumably a trigon of bankers chosen more for their control of wealth and business connections than for their intellects. Aries of the U.S.A. and Leo of the Near East are, like Geldbeutel, in the trigon of Fire. That is to say, they are fighters, men of enormous wealth and at the same time

organising capacity—and known to the public as such. But I suspect that the greatest brains of all, the men of really stupendous intellect, are located in the trigon of Air, that is to say, they are the thinkers directing movements and mass propaganda all over the world. That is why they remain wrapped in mystery, so that we have never heard of them."

"And now that we've discovered who they are," said Kavanagh, "what can we do about it? They still remain only names to us. How can we find out more about them, discover their methods of working in order to be able to counter them? We can't go and live in Thibet and in the Sahara and in the U.S.A. and the other places they inhabit all in turn so as to keep them under observation."

"No, and if we did go and live there, we should probably never get a chance of observing them. The members of the Zodiac are not likely to be very approachable. Sagittarius certainly didn't seem very sociable at Stolzenbach," remarked Brandon. "But, seriously," he went on, "I'm afraid we're about at the end of our tether. This is the sort of thing that makes us realise our limitations as independent investigators. We've discovered who the individuals are at the back of the conspiracy, but only men with an organisation at their disposal can attempt to defeat it. That's why I think the time has come to hand the matter over to the Secret Service. They have their agents everywhere, and within a week could probably procure a dossier of every member of the Zodiac. I don't say such dossiers would be exhaustive, but they would provide more details than we could collect in a year. The Secret Service may not be much use in solving world problems, but give it a definite concrete line of investigation to

follow, and you'll find its way of working absolutely amazing. When it comes to practical sleuth work I take my hat off to it every time."

"Well, after all, we've got pretty definite evidence to go on now—photographs of the correspondence we intercepted at Bogazzo, the story of what happened in the Temple and at the clinic, the actual document signed between von Rauschenberg and the British Socialists at Stolzenbach, notes of all you discovered at the Cosmos Restaurant, and finally the inside story of the Greenworthy tragedy and the list of the Zodiac. I don't think even the most incredulous of officials can maintain now that your theory lacks proof."

"It all depends on whom one gets in touch with. My old colonel, 'Bronx,' would be the best man to go to. Anyhow, I'll ring him up and try to get an interview as soon as possible."

Colonel Brock—irreverently known as "Bronx"—when approached on the telephone proved most cordial. "Of course, my dear fellow, I'll be delighted to see you again. Come in to-morrow at eleven o'clock and have a glass of sherry."

Brandon had only ten minutes to wait next morning before being ushered into the presence of the great man, who lost no time in handing him a glass of the promised Amontillado, at the same time offering him a cigar. "Try one of these, really Ar. I was lucky in being able to get a hundred of them at the sale of poor Gregson's things last week. Bad luck his going broke, eh? Well, now about yourself, Brandon, doing first-rate, I hear, with the painting business—your pictures are all the rage amongst the ladies, what?"

"Yes," said Brandon. "I'm doing quite well in that line. But it was really my other work I came to talk to

you about. You may remember I started on a line of investigation of my own."

"Ah, of course. I was sorry you wouldn't come into my Department. You always had a flair for that kind of work. However, you know your own business best. Now I come to think of it, my people tell me you've given them very useful bits of information from time to time."

"I'm glad of that, sir. But what I've come to tell you to-day is more than a bit of information; it's practically the result of my whole life's work since the war."

"Really! And what's that?"

"Well, that at last I've discovered what's at the back of the whole world movement."

"World movement?" Colonel Brock repeated with a puzzled expression. "What do you mean precisely by that?"

"The revolutionary movement. I don't mean only the political, but the occult side of the show."

"Occult?" Colonel Brock said, frowning. "My dear fellow, I really can't follow you. I don't see what occultism has to do with revolution."

"But it has everything to do with it. If you can spare the time, sir, I'll tell you the whole story."

Colonel Brock looked at the clock. "I've got another half-hour before my next appointment, so get on with it, Brandon. Have another glass of sherry, no? And are you really enjoying that cigar? By Jove, you haven't got it lit!" Colonel Brock held out a match, then, filling up his glass, he settled down to listen.

Beginning with Rosamund's story Brandon related all the events of the past six months, his adventures on the Continent and amongst the Communists in London,

ending up with the Greenworthy affair and the finding of the list of the Zodiac.

Colonel Brock heard him out patiently ; only now and then a slightly bored expression crossed his plump features, and once or twice he glanced again at the clock.

" My dear fellow," he said at last when Brandon had finished, " all this may be very interesting, but I'm inclined to think you over-estimate the importance of what you call ' occult influences.' It strikes me that you've been working a bit too hard and got the whole thing rather on your nerves. If I were you I'd go away for a good rest and change—a Mediterranean cruise, for example. They say this new Italian liner is remarkably comfortable. I thought of taking a holiday in her myself."

" Thanks, but I don't feel in the least in need of a rest and change. What I want is to get on with the business in hand. And if you think I've exaggerated the importance of the occult power, you'll surely admit the danger this presents to the country." And taking the pact signed between von Rauschenberg and the Socialist M.P.s from his pocket Brandon laid it on the table before " Bronx." " There's nothing occult about that, is there, sir ? "

Colonel Brock ran his eye over the document and screwed up his mouth and nose as if sniffing a bad smell.

" A nasty bit of business," he said. " But what else do you expect of those fellows ? However, as you see it all depends on their getting into office again, and as they may never get into office again we really needn't take them too seriously. At any rate, the present National Government is good for another year or so, I'm told."

"Et après cela le déluge!" Brandon said with a mirthless hoot. "But meanwhile I don't see why they shouldn't be proceeded against for high treason."

"Oh, Parbury would never agree to that. You know the sort of man he is—wouldn't do anything to antagonise the Labour Party. I think he's wrong there, but what can one do? He certainly has the Conservative electorate behind him. What he says goes."

"Yes, I suppose it does," said Brandon, rising. "Then you think there's nothing to be done, sir?"

"I don't see anything at present—not just at present, but I'll think it over. Meanwhile, don't forget about that Mediterranean cruise—you're looking a bit overstrained, my dear fellow." And with a hearty handshake he took leave of Brandon.

So this was all the world plot meant to the official mind. The Secret Service, Brandon knew from experience, comprised many young men of brilliant intellect and sterling honesty, men he could trust up to the hilt, but they occupied subordinate positions. It was only through their Chiefs that the wheels of the Secret Service activity could be set in motion, and the Chiefs knew little of the secrets contained in the files of their departments, which no doubt would corroborate the evidence he himself had been able to collect.

Sunk in gloom Brandon made his way to Kavanagh's flat, where the prospective candidate for South Mer-shire was to be found dictating correspondence to his secretary.

"It's no go," he said, sinking into a chair by the fire, and he related the events of the morning.

"Amazing, isn't it?" said Kavanagh when Brandon had finished. "Will nothing open the eyes of these

people to the danger threatening the country ? ”

“ Nothing but the crash itself,” said Brandon, “ and when that comes it will be too late.”

“ It seems to me,” said Rosamund slowly, “ that in trying to convince the official mind it’s no good dealing in abstractions. And anything like occult powers are abstractions to them. Not one of them would believe the story I told you and Terence—they’d only think I was mad and suffering from delusions. But talk to them of guns or bomb plots and they’ll take you seriously. They can’t see that there are more destructive forces in the world than phosgene or T.N.T.”

“ I think Rosamund’s right,” said Kavanagh. “ I don’t believe it is any use talking to them of what’s behind the world movement. The story of the Zodiac, for example, only appears to them fantastic. However, in the pact signed with von Rauschenberg we’ve something tangible. It seems to me that it would be better to bank on that and leave the rest out of the question for the moment.”

“ Yes,” said Brandon, “ but that’s more a matter for statesmen to deal with. Bagnall and Co. have the complete confidence of the Tories at present ; if we could shake that we should have accomplished something. There’s every prospect of another General Election before long, with the Tories as usual avoiding ‘ personalities ’ so as to enable the Socialists to get back to office, but even the Tories could hardly say that the publication of a document such as this went beyond the bounds of fair play. Guy Fawkes’s gunpowder plot was a mild practical joke compared to the coup Bagnall and his friends propose to bring off.”

“ Why don’t you go to the Prime Minister yourself, Terence ? ” said Rosamund. “ He’d be simply bound

to sit up and take notice of a thing like this."

"I believe that would be the best plan," said Kavanagh. "Parbury was quite friendly down at Lingford in the summer—wished me well, and said he hoped I'd drop in to Mrs. Parbury's 'At Homes' at Number Ten sometimes, which I dutifully did. Parbury was still amiable on these occasions, although no doubt he'd been warned against me as a Diehard. At any rate, his manner was quite different to Bloxham's."

"Oh, Parbury's the most good-natured fellow in the world," said Brandon. "A man whose motto is 'anything for a quiet life' could hardly be otherwise. Tackle him by all means, Terence. Whether he'll do anything is another question."

So it was finally decided that Kavanagh should write to the Prime Minister telling him he wished to speak to him on a matter of the highest national importance.

The request met with a cordial reply from Mr. Parbury's secretary, and at the appointed hour Kavanagh, armed with the fateful document—which Brandon had been careful to photograph—presented himself at 10 Downing Street.

"Good morning, Major Kavanagh," the arbiter of the nation's destinies said in a friendly tone. "Glad to see you looking so well. What a pleasant time we had that week-end last June! A lovely bit of country that. I've always been so attached to the Weald of Sussex. If only one could throw off the cares of State and settle down there in peace to sheep-farming."

"I don't know that I've ever been particularly drawn to sheep," answered Kavanagh. "They're rather unresponsive animals, aren't they?"

"Not when you know them, not when you know them," Mr. Parbury said heartily. "I had an old ram

now——” and he went off into extensive ovine reminiscences.

Kavanagh listened with well-concealed impatience.

“Well, sir,” he said at last when Parbury left him an opportunity to speak. “I really came to see you about a matter of some importance.”

“Ah, yes, to be sure,” the Prime Minister replied, glancing at Kavanagh’s letter that lay before him on the table. “Tell me all about it,” he added with a pleasant smile, lighting his pipe.

“In view of the present situation,” Kavanagh began, choosing his words very carefully, “it seemed to me advisable that certain facts should be brought to your notice. I understand that a General Election in the near future is not improbable.”

“It is by no means impossible,” Parbury agreed.

“And that it is equally not impossible,” continued Kavanagh, “that the Socialist Party might this time be returned with a majority.”

“I think not,” said Parbury, but his voice conveyed no conviction. “Bloxham at the Central Office tells me we are not likely to lose much ground. Reports from the provinces are on the whole quite reassuring.”

“Still, considering the violence of the present leader of the so-called Labour Party, Hanley, you will agree that the mere possibility of their taking over the reins of power is alarming?”

“I don’t know about that, Major Kavanagh. Hanley is, as you say, at present somewhat of an extremist, but office has a remarkably sobering effect on men of his stamp. Besides, if he went too far there would always be the more moderate men of his Party to keep him in check. Such men as Bagnall, for example, could be safely relied on not to support any

really extreme measures."

"That is precisely what I wanted to put before you, Mr. Parbury. If you are depending on Bagnall and his friends to maintain the constitution of this country, I am afraid you are mistaken."

For the first time a shade of annoyance crossed the Prime Minister's brow. He was not accustomed to be told he was mistaken by Conservative back-benchers, let alone a mere aspirant to those lowly seats. But he contented himself with saying good-humouredly :

"Come, come, Kavanagh, you are allowing yourself to be carried away by your prejudices. Bagnall, Pudsey, and the others of their kind are excellent fellows at bottom ; they have the interests of the Empire just as much at heart as you or I. When it came to the point they would never agree to anything unconstitutional."

"What would you say then," said Kavanagh, leaning forward and looking Parbury in the eye, "if I could prove to you that they are prepared to bring about the downfall of the British Empire ?"

"My dear fellow, you certainly could not prove that to me," Parbury answered, with a doubting smile.

"Then will you read this ?" Kavanagh said, taking the Rauschenberg pact out of his pocket and laying it before the Prime Minister.

Mr. Parbury ran his eyes over it with a puzzled expression. "Bagnall—Pudsey—Renton—and signed by von Rauschenberg," he repeated, reading out the signatures.

"Yes," said Kavanagh. "A pact between these three Socialist members and the great Pan-German General, to form an Anglo-Soviet alliance, to destroy the Constitution of this country, abolish the Monarchy,

and break up the British Empire. What more do you want as evidence of high treason ? ”

Mr. Parbury pushed the paper away meditatively. He had ceased to smile, but his face betrayed neither alarm nor indignation.

“ High treason is a strong word,” he said slowly, “ a somewhat obsolete word, if you don’t mind my saying so. We are not living in the Elizabethan era. I don’t mean to minimise the seriousness of the thing, you understand ; it is serious, quite serious. But it would be possible to exaggerate its importance. The fulfilment of this pact,” and he tapped the paper, “ depends, you see, on the Labour Party getting into office again after the next General Election, and, as I said just now, they are unlikely to be returned with a majority. If they are, well, wild promises made when in Opposition are not likely to be fulfilled by men who have assumed the responsibility of government.”

“ But this is not a case of wild promises,” Kavanagh interposed, “ it is a case of a definite treasonable pact, signed, sealed and delivered——”

Mr. Parbury put up his hand. “ I know all that, my dear Kavanagh, but even signed pacts are not always adhered to.”

“ But why risk the possibility of its being carried out ? ” said Kavanagh uncontrollably ; “ now that you know what these men’s commitments are, why allow them ever to take office ? Why not impeach them now before Parliament, before the whole country, and let the nation understand their real character ? ”

“ I hardly think that would serve any useful purpose. We do not wish to appear vindictive. And at any rate, before taking action I should like to submit this document to my expert advisers. I have at first

to be assured that it is genuine."

"But I took it myself out of Bagnall's pocket! How could it be a forgery?" And Kavanagh briefly related the incident of the motor-car accident at Stolzenbach.

"I can't help being sorry you did that, Kavanagh. It was hardly playing the game."

"But this isn't a game, it's war, deadly warfare against the Monarchy and the British Empire. Surely any means are justified to defeat such a plot?"

"Well, well, that's a matter of opinion. Personally I consider that it wasn't cricket. However, the thing is done. I will ask you now to leave the document with me."

Kavanagh demurred. "I'd rather not let it out of my hands, sir. You see, if anything happened to it the whole case would fall to the ground."

"You need have no fear for its safety. It is absolutely necessary I should have it to lay before the Cabinet when it meets on Tuesday."

This seemed unanswerable. The Prime Minister could not be expected to deal with the matter alone, and he evidently judged it to be of considerable importance after all, since he proposed to discuss it at a Cabinet meeting. And as Kavanagh could hardly expect to be present on such an occasion, there was nothing for it but to leave the document in the Prime Minister's hands.

"May I ask you, sir," he said, getting up to go, "if you will see me again after the Cabinet meeting, and if possible let me have the document back then?"

"That depends, that depends. I will see you however on Wednesday, if you call at the same hour. I can then let you know what has taken place."

And with a rather less cordial handshake than he had given Kavanagh on entering, the Prime Minister closed the interview.

Punctually at the appointed hour on Wednesday, Kavanagh presented himself again at Downing Street.

Mr. Parbury was seated at his table with a distinctly harassed expression on his usually placid countenance.

"Good morning, Major Kavanagh. I am sorry that I have no news for you so far. We were unable to discuss the matter of your document at the Cabinet meeting yesterday. The fact is, that by some unfortunate oversight it was not returned to me in time by the expert adviser to whom I had submitted it. In fact, I have not yet received it back from the hands in which it has been placed."

"Whose hands?" asked Kavanagh, taken aback.

"Well, I can hardly tell you that," said the Prime Minister, beginning to fidget nervously with a paper knife. "We have, you understand, certain advisers whom we are accustomed to consult on matters of importance, especially those relating to international affairs. I think you can safely rely on my judgment in this question."

"But—but——" stammered Kavanagh, becoming more and more alarmed, "supposing the document had got into the hands of—of—well, Oscar Franklin, for example?"

"It is curious you should say that. As it happens—I think I may tell you this—it *was* Mr. Oscar Franklin I consulted on this occasion."

"Good God!" Kavanagh cried frantically, starting out of his chair and clasping his head with his hands.

"Good God! You gave the document to Oscar

Franklin ! " And he began to pace the room like one demented.

" Calm yourself, Kavanagh," the Prime Minister said, looking at him with surprised annoyance. " There is nothing to excite yourself about in this way. Mr. Oscar Franklin, as you should know, is one of our most powerful supporters. He has regularly contributed substantial sums to the funds of the Party. And the position he occupies in the financial world makes him a most valuable authority on international questions. No one is more qualified to pronounce a judgment on a delicate question such as the document you handed me, both as regards its authenticity and the interpretation that must be placed on it. Mr. Franklin is a man of the highest integrity."

" Oscar Franklin a man of the highest integrity ! Would you like me to tell you what I know about the man ? " Kavanagh said uncontrollably, wondering where he should begin if he were called on to relate the history of " Capricornus." Should he say he was a member of the Zodiac ? No, that would mean nothing to the ingenuous Mr. Parbury, and even if the facts about the Zodiac were explained to him he would simply refuse to believe them. What then about his rôle in the Clinic Nirvana, as the would-be murderer of Rosamund, or as the virtual murderer of Greenworthy and his daughter ? No, that also would appear fantastic ; truth too often is so much stranger than fiction. So suiting himself to the mentality of his audience of one, Kavanagh said briefly :

" I can tell you that Oscar Franklin is one of the most dangerous men in the world ; he is in the very hub of the Bolshevik conspiracy."

" Come, come, come, Major Kavanagh, you have

allowed your imagination to run away with you. What you say is absurd. Franklin is one of the most resolute opponents of Bolshevism and, as I have already told you, a strong supporter of the Conservative cause. As to his failure to return the document in time for the Cabinet meeting, it was of course most unfortunate, but you will understand that in the case of a man as busy as Franklin a matter of this kind might escape his attention and the document be momentarily mislaid."

"Ah, then you know it has been mislaid?"

"Yes, a telephone message was sent to him just before the Cabinet meeting requesting him to return it without delay, but his secretary replied that he was unfortunately not able at the moment to lay his hand on it. He added, however, that a search would be made and the paper returned to me without fail."

Kavanagh listened, stunned. For a moment he had lost the power of speech. He knew the difficulty of securing interviews with official personages where any awkward situation was involved, he knew that once the door had closed behind him he might never again succeed in penetrating into Mr. Parbury's sanctum. So realising that this was probably his last chance, he pulled himself together and, almost forgetting whom he was addressing, he said vehemently:

"Mr. Parbury, you must *demand* the return of the document immediately. For once in your life show some energy! Ring up Franklin and insist on its return this very moment."

Too surprised, or perhaps too hypnotised by Kavanagh's authoritative tone, to resist, Mr. Parbury summoned his secretary and requested to be put on to Mr. Oscar Franklin.

A moment later the bell rang. Mr. Parbury held the receiver to his ear, listened silently, then answering : " I see ; I thank you," replaced the receiver and turned towards Kavanagh :

" I am sorry, extremely sorry that I am unable to meet your request. Mr. Oscar Franklin sailed for America in the *Caronia* this morning."

Kavanagh never knew how he got out of Downing Street that day. Afterwards he had only a confused memory of staring wildly at Mr. Parbury, uttering a few incoherent phrases accompanied by violent gestures, and staggering to the door. He was never quite sure that he had not taken that imperturbable figure at the desk by the shoulders and shaken it with all his might. He knew that he felt inclined to do so, but he hoped he had refrained. For a Conservative candidate to shake the Prime Minister would certainly be without precedent.

Brandon listened horror-struck to the story Kavanagh had to relate when he reached his friend's studio.

" It's a ghastly business," he said. " Of course we must make up our minds to the original document having been done away with. Still, we have mercifully got the photographs. Some use might be made of them."

" Not with the politicians. They're all too terrified of Franklin to take any steps that would lead to an exposure of the part he has played in the matter. Parbury, I could see, was genuinely upset about it ; he evidently had complete confidence in the man. So they all have. It would take more than this to shake it."

" Then you absolve Parbury of all complicity ? "

"Absolutely. I believe he still thinks it was an oversight of Franklin's."

"But when he finds that the document has disappeared for good?"

"By the time that becomes evident, Parbury will have forgotten all about it."

Kavanagh began to pace the room feverishly, then coming to a sudden stop, he said:

"Look here, Jimmy, there's only one thing for us now."

"And that is——?"

"The Press."

And resuming his walk about the room, Kavanagh went on vehemently: "I'll go to every newspaper in London with the story. We've got the photograph of the document and the snapshot of the party at Schloss Stolzenbach. What more can they want? They made enough of the Zinoviev letter, which, as you've often said, was child's play compared to the Rauschenberg pact. Why shouldn't they feature this?"

"Try it by all means, my dear fellow. But you forget that the Zinoviev letter didn't involve a single member of the Zodiac. It only involved the Bolshevik façade at which the public are allowed to gaze to their hearts' content. This is a very different matter. However, go ahead, and more power to your elbow—you'll need it to get into some of these newspaper offices."

So Kavanagh started on his quest. Beginning with the most "moderate" of the Constitutional dailies, he went from door to door asking to see the editor. In two cases the editor was said to be engaged; in four, however, he succeeded in gaining admittance to the

editorial sanctum, and met with a cordial reception. The papers were just now hard up for news. The Prince of Wales had happily recovered from the attack of pneumonia that had kept the country on tenterhooks all the previous week. The Greenworthy tragedy, satisfactorily ascribed to Sir Paul's financial anxieties, had proved less than a nine days' wonder. If Major Kavanagh had anything of a really sensational nature to communicate he was more than welcome.

Kavanagh explained that what he had to relate was sensational to the highest degree, involving as it did the whole fate of the British Empire.

The editors, each in turn, scenting a scoop, listened attentively, but each ended by shaking his head and saying firmly :

"I'm much obliged to you for bringing me this story. It's interesting of course—and most extraordinary. But I'm afraid we can't touch it."

One alone, Dartford, the editor of the *London Argus*, an ardently patriotic paper, took a bolder line.

"This is stupendous, Major Kavanagh. Of course it must be published. I quite understand, though, papers refusing it. There's considerable risk attaching to it. You see, it doesn't only involve these Labour men, but also Oscar Franklin over the disappearance of the original document. And the power he and his allies exercise over the Press is formidable—in the matter of advertisements, you understand. Of course a paper can't live without advertisements.

"Still," he went on cheerfully, "in a case of this importance the *London Argus* would be prepared to take the risk. It may affect us financially, but what's going to become of the country if this plot comes off ?

That's the first consideration. I'll take the matter up at once with Mr. Parbury, and if he confirms your evidence—as I conclude he will—we'll come out with the whole thing, giving it a leader as well. It will be a bombshell to the country. Thank you again for coming to me. You may have saved the country."

Kavanagh returned triumphantly to Brandon.

"If Dartford sticks to his guns," said Brandon, "the thing is done."

It was hard to control their impatience until the *London Argus* arrived two days later—ah! there was the promised leader and on the opposite page the incriminating document reproduced and featured, together with the snapshot of the group at Stolzenbach. Kavanagh breathed a sigh of relief. There could be no question that the country would be stirred to its depths.

Early in the afternoon he strolled round to his club in Piccadilly and found some of the members languidly discussing the new political sensation. A few of the older "Die-Hards" were indignant, declaring that the three Labour members should be impeached for high treason. But in general it was agreed that the *London Argus*, always prone to take an "extreme" view, had made too much of the affair.

"After all, what have Bagnall and his friends done? Signed a pact with von Rauschenberg? Well, he showed himself a very gallant foe during the War. And he's been received over here by plenty of important people since."

"And if they did accept foreign money, it was only on behalf of their Party—to pay for Election expenses. No great harm in that!"

"Good Lord!" expostulated a ninety-year-old

General in the corner. "But they were plotting the overthrow of the Monarchy and the break-up of the British Empire!"

"Oh, well, they think that would be for the good of the world! We don't agree with them, of course; still, everyone has a right to his own opinions. And the Socialists have always professed Republican sentiments. As to the Empire, all Empires have passed away in time. We can't expect ours to last for ever."

And so on.

By the end of a week it was plain that what society referred to as the *London Argus's* "latest stunt" had fallen completely flat. A writ for libel had been issued against the paper, but the case was never set down for trial. Why remind the public of what it had now forgotten? The Christmas holidays provided pleasanter food for thought.

"I'm just wondering," Brandon said to Kavanagh when they finally realised the situation; "I'm just wondering whether the whole thing is a tragedy or a roaring farce. We've gone through fire and flood to get all this information on the world plot, and now we can do nothing with it."

"No," said Kavanagh, "we can do nothing with it. Absolutely nothing."

CHAPTER XV

THE DEBACLE

EARLY in the following year Lady Dare died of influenza, and Rosamund being left alone, Kavanagh urged that they should be married without further delay. After a quiet wedding, with only a few friends present in the church and a brief honeymoon in Portugal, they settled down in Kavanagh's rooms in Half Moon Street and got to work again.

For Terence Kavanagh was not the man to sit down long under defeat. His resolve to stand for Parliament remained unshaken, the more so since the second National Government had failed and a General Election was to be held on the issue of Conservatism versus Socialism—unhappily with the same leaders at the head of the Conservative Party.

So, with Rosamund as his companion in arms, Kavanagh went down to South Mershire and started on a vigorous campaign against his Socialist opponent. He understood the working-class mind well enough to realise that it has no use for the compromises and concessions dear to the heart of the Intelligentsia, and his habit of hard hitting won him support on all sides. Even the people who did not agree with him respected his courage and warmed involuntarily to the fire of enthusiasm that flashed out in his speeches, whilst Rosamund's charm and reasoned arguments ensured her a sympathetic hearing.

In spite of his secret discouragement at the inertia of

his Party and the lack of support given him by its Central Office, Kavanagh fought on undismayed. He was determined that if possible there should be at least one man at Westminster who knew the truth and *would have the right* to tell it to the country.

But his successes evidently did not enhance his popularity in official circles. Apart from his own particular friends, he found a gulf widening around him, and the other members, when he dropped in at the Carlton Club ; men who would formerly come up with a hearty, "Hullo ! old chap !" or settle down beside him for a talk, now nodded coldly or moved away if he sat down near them.

"I can't think what's the matter with these fellows," he said one day to General Brighorn, whom he had grown rather to like in spite of his crossword complex. There was something wholesome, frank, and cheery about him that gave one the feeling of sitting over an open fire and was pleasant if one happened to be feeling the draught. Besides, Brighorn was a man everybody talked to and who knew what was going on.

"I feel they're not particularly friendly just now," Kavanagh went on, throwing out a feeler.

"Well, as you've noticed that——" the General began. Then clearing his throat he added : "I fancy it's gone round that you're a bit extreme, Kavanagh. Fellows don't like that, you know. They've heard of course about your electioneering campaign in the Midlands and they feel you're rather an *alarmist*."

"An alarmist ! But if they knew what I know," said Kavanagh, "they'd jolly well realise that there's something to be alarmed about." Would it be possible to confide in Brighorn and get him to help in opening

the eyes of members ? But no, he was too comfortable to wish to make himself unpopular.

" Oh yes, my dear fellow," the General was saying, " of course you and I know the dangers of the Bolshevik menace. I've spoken out on it loud enough myself. But when it comes to attacking the Labour Party it's different."

" Is it—when we know what some of them have been plotting abroad ? Besides, look at what they say themselves they'll do if they get into power ! Nationalise the land, the banks, transport, electricity, the big industries of the country as a beginning."

" Oh, my dear fellow," interrupted the General with a laugh, " they won't really do that. They may say they will, but when it comes to the point they'll see it's impracticable."

At this moment, however, the member for Mudford claimed the General's attention, and he turned away with evident relief to discuss the prospects of the Cambridgeshire.

" Are all these people mad, or am I ? " Kavanagh said to Brandon that evening as they sat over whiskies and sodas in his rooms. " They make one feel at times that hunting, racing, and tips on the Stock Exchange really are the only things that matter, and that one must be a crank to bother about trifles like the fate of the Empire."

" Well, they'll wake up when their world comes to an end—that's to say when the hunting's stopped and racing is nationalised. That's the only thing that'll get under their skins."

" And by that time it'll be too late. But it's no good warning them. You might as well try to rouse the sleepers in an opium den. Besides, they're perfectly

convinced of getting in again with a thumping majority."

As the fateful date approached a certain liveliness sprang up at the Carlton Club and other haunts of the Party. For a fortnight before the day fixed for the polls, sport ceased to be the main topic of conversation, and the chances of candidates were discussed with almost the same fervour as the chances of horses hitherto. Now that the Election campaign had begun the Labour Party became fair game for attack; "personalities" had of course to be excluded, hence no mention of the Rauschenberg pact could be made, but the published programme of the Party met with eloquent denunciations. The public, however, too long lulled to slumber, refused to be alarmed and the result of the General Election was a crushing defeat for the Conservatives. The former Prime Minister himself, Mr. Nelson Parbury, lost his seat, and the Socialist Party under George Hanley, the leader of the Left Wing, came in with an overwhelming majority.

But Terence Kavanagh, to his astonishment, found himself member for South Mershire and one of the attenuated Conservative Opposition in the House of Commons.

After this events moved rapidly. The House of Lords was immediately abolished, only a handful of members going out into the Conservative lobby in protest. The rest, fearing to appear "reactionary," voted with the Socialists.

The Government knew better than to make the mistake of putting forward measures of internal policy that were likely to meet with hostility not only from the Opposition benches but from the country at large. Instead they proceeded to pass a single act, called the

Emergency Powers Act, giving unlimited powers to the Executive to be promulgated by Orders in Council.

England thus came to be governed much as Germany was governed by Hitler after the drastic change in the Constitution which empowered him to issue decrees prepared by the Chancellor in Cabinet. Only in England this virtual dictatorship, instead of being in the hands of an ardent national patriot, was in those of a Socialist bureaucracy allied with the most implacable enemies of the country.

Their first act was to conclude an alliance between Great Britain and the Soviet Government. Their next was to abolish all titles. For the moment it was deemed advisable not to touch the Monarchy. The people so far would not stand it.

Then came the nationalisation of the banks, placing all national finance and business under the control of the Zodiac and their nominees.

Nationalisation of the land, then of mines, railways, and transport followed. Then the great industries of the country were taken over one by one and placed under "the State."

In vain the "possessing classes" protested; their estates confiscated, their dividends cut off at the source by the State banks and transferred to the Exchequer, they were left without the means to make their voices heard. The former captain of industry now counted for less than the man who swept out his nationalised workshop.

In this way a perfectly bloodless revolution was accomplished.

Meanwhile unemployment had reached gigantic proportions. An attempt had been made to meet it by increased doles and by reducing hours of labour to four

and finally to two a day. But owing to the slump in industry there was still not enough work to go round.

The "people," however, were kept happy by the decrees on "Free Transport" and "Free Entertainment," enabling the "workers"—and the "workers" only—to be carried free by bus, tram or tube to free cinemas, theatres, football matches and greyhound races, at which, owing to the amount of leisure at their disposal, employed and unemployed alike were able to spend most of the day. The golf courses having also been nationalised, were crowded from morning till night, not only with players; and picnic parties on the greens, scattering paper bags and empty salmon tins around them, made putting more a game of chance than of skill. In London the traffic problem had become acute, for the whole proletariat being on the move at once, the streets were almost impassable and blocks lasted for half an hour at a time.

These glorious jaunts had the desired effect, and prevented any popular agitation against the passing of the Government's final Bill, which was duly placed on the table of the House.

The debate had begun with a discussion on the situation in India, where revolt was reported to be breaking out in all directions. The small British forces still remaining faithful to the Viceroy—now only a figurehead, deprived of all real authority—had declared that they found service impossible and their numbers unequal to dealing with revolt on so vast a scale.

Kavanagh then rose to ask whether the Government was prepared at once to reinforce the troops in India and restore order before it was too late.

"The answer was in the negative."

The late Secretary of State for the Colonies under the Conservative Government then asked whether it was true that cables had been received from Australia and New Zealand offering help for the required reinforcement. His Socialist successor in office replied that the cables referred to had been received, but the Government did not propose to avail themselves of the help offered.

"Why? Why?" asked a number of Conservative members.

This was the signal for the Prime Minister, George Hanley, to hurl his bombshell into the Opposition benches. With convulsed features and the light of fanaticism gleaming in his eyes, he embarked on a tirade against the iniquities of "Imperialism—the British Raj more ruthless than any Juggernaut, crushing the life out of the Indian people and battenning on their life-blood." Then passing on to the proffered help from the Dominions, he cried :

"What are Australia and New Zealand but dependencies of that same brutal autocracy? Let them be free as India must be free, as Ireland must be free, free to work out their own destinies under guidance of the workers of each country. Away with colonies, away with the shibboleth of Dominion status! Let us declare that the British Empire is wound up and has ceased to exist!"

Frantic applause from the Government benches greeted this speech, to which the Conservatives listened in consternation, finally breaking out into a chorus of protest.

But it was too late.

The motion put to the House three days later met with whole-hearted support from the Socialist members,

who, at the division, streamed out to a man into the Government lobby.

The Bill was passed by a large majority amidst a pandemonium in which Conservative groans were drowned by the deafening cheers of their opponents.

The British Empire had ceased to exist.

Kavanagh, walking back to Half Moon Street as in a dream that evening, noted the posters at the street corners announcing the usual startling news: "Famous film star divorced," "Former Baronet at Bow Street." . . . Buying a paper he scanned the column headings. No, there was nothing yet about the debate. He turned to the stop press. Ah! there it was! Beneath the cricket scores and latest racing news, two lines of small print: "Replying to Major Kavanagh this afternoon the Prime Minister proposed the complete independence of India and the Dominions."

"So passes the British Empire!" Kavanagh said aloud, crushing the paper into a ball and hurling it into the gutter.

Reaching the rooms which his salary as a legislator still allowed him to retain, Kavanagh found Rosamund busy with the scanty evening meal which, now that domestic service had been abolished, they were wont to prepare for themselves. In a few brief sentences he told her what had occurred.

"So that's the end!" Rosamund said blankly. "Oh, Terence, to think that everything might have been saved if only they'd have listened to you and Jimmy!"

"Yes. It's ghastly. But there's no good in going over the past. We've got to face the future."

"And the only way to do that is to live by the day

and hour," Rosamund said practically. "If only the milkman would come I'd make the coffee."

Under Socialism the State dairyman bringing round the blue liquid that did duty for milk was liable to arrive at any odd hour of the day or night—it all depended on when supplies arrived from the country.

"There's a ring at the bell, perhaps that's the milkman," said Kavanagh, rising and going to the door. "Hullo, it's Jimmy! Come in, old chap."

Brandon, who was now earning a precarious livelihood as a State cinema decorator, entered glumly.

"You've heard then?" asked Kavanagh.

Brandon nodded. The news from Westminster had reached him on his way home from work. Sitting down he took out his pipe and filled it with the rank weed supplied by the State Tobacco Company.

"Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die!" Kavanagh said after a long silence, with a heavy attempt at cheerfulness. "Share our orgy of macaroni and coffee substitute. We're only waiting for the milkman, to begin."

"Talking of macaroni," Brandon answered, pulling a letter out of his pocket, "reminds me that this arrived to-day from Italy. You'd heard Countess Zapraksy died suddenly the other day?"

"Yes. I don't think she ever got over the shock of all that happened at Bogazzo. It must have been a terrible disillusionment to her."

"Well, the strange thing is, that she's left you and me heirs to her property—the Villa Pax Mundi and quite a lot of money. This letter is from her lawyers. What are we to do about it? Go over and claim it?"

"Yes. But we shouldn't be allowed to bring money over here and we can't settle at Bogazzo."

"No. We're not rats to desert the sinking ship."

"Just so. But what about getting Rosamund out of the country?"

"Thanks. I'm not going to be got out," Rosamund said firmly. "I'll stick it as long as you both do. But there's no reason why we shouldn't all go to Bogazzo for a breather now and then, is there? Hullo, I believe that really *is* the milkman this time."

For a rattle of cans had sounded outside. Going to the door Kavanagh took their meagre ration of milk from the man's hand and was surprised to hear him say:

"You don't remember me, Major Kavanagh!"

Where had he heard that voice before? Looking for the first time at the milkman's face, which also seemed familiar, he answered:

"Not for the moment—and yet—and yet—is it possible that you are Mr. Parbury?"

Mr. Parbury, shabby and haggard with a stubbly growth around his chin!

"Is it really you?" Kavanagh repeated in astonishment.

"Yes, Nelson Parbury. Once Prime Minister of England. We little thought we should live to see this day."

It was almost more than Kavanagh could do not to answer: "My good Parbury, I knew it, but you would not believe me!" But on the principle of never saying "I told you so!" he only answered:

"Well, Mr. Parbury, I'm sorry to see you've come to this."

"Oh, I'm lucky to have a job at all," Mr. Parbury answered, with well-assumed cheerfulness; "it's the news I've just heard from the House that's upset me."

Is it really true that they've wound up the Empire ? ”

“ Yes, only too true. You'll see it in the papers to-morrow.”

Mr. Parbury took out a large grey pocket handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

“ The poor old Empire ! ” he muttered, “ the poor old Empire ! To think it's gone ! ”

Shaking his head mournfully, he picked up his milk cans and went on with his rounds.

By the morning the Press had realised that something quite sensational had happened in Westminster. The Test Match was actually relegated to the fourth column, whilst leading articles and glaring headlines dealt with last night's debate. The organ of the Socialist Party of course was jubilant, but the constitutional Press in general expressed disapprobation, rising in one or two cases to almost violent protestations—this thing must not be, the country would not stand it, etc.

But the principal daily mouthpiece of the Conservative Central Office set the example of sanity, warning the country not to give way to hysteria.

“ The present situation,” it wrote, “ must be faced with calmness. Whatever sentimental regrets may be entertained at the passing of so time-honoured an institution as the British Empire, it behoves us to take a larger view than that of narrow nationalism, and to consider the welfare of the world at large. Seen from this angle the action of the Government last night was statesmanlike and far-sighted, a gesture which cannot fail to arouse admiration in every corner of the earth. Britain has shown her strength by surrendering those advantages won in the past by force and by recognising that with the advance of civilisation the word ‘ Im-

perialism ' must be expunged from our vocabulary," etc., etc.

At Geneva the great news was received with acclamations, and the League of Nations, at a special meeting convened for the occasion, passed a unanimous resolution that : " The abolition of the British Empire marks the passing of Imperialism and provides the surest guarantee for the peace of the world." In consequence " the Disarmament Conference which has sat for ten years can now be disbanded."

Although the Empire was gone the Government still dared not touch the Monarchy, and contented itself with depriving it of all authority. The Royal Family became virtually prisoners in the Palace, as it had been in France after 1789.

It was further decided that the Soviet system should not be adopted as it was unsuited to the British people, whose individualistic character might make them less docile members of soviets (or councils) than the Russian workers. The farce of pretending to admit them to the government of the country would be quickly seen through here. Legislation was therefore carried out by the host of officials from East and Central Europe who had swarmed into the country and been placed in key positions in every sphere of distribution.

Up till this moment the orgy of free amusements and unlimited food supplies by the State from the stocks laid in by the previous Government had kept the workers quiet. But now, owing to the dislocation of industry and the decline of national credit, supplies began to fail. Rates and taxes having been abolished since there was no one left to pay them, the dole had to

be done away with, and the population kept alive on rations that grew every week more meagre. An undercurrent of discontent now arose, and the sight of their new masters driving through the streets in luxurious motors with complacent smiles on their Oriental features was gradually rousing the populace to frenzy.

All pretence of Parliamentary Government was finally abandoned, for power had now passed from the hands of legislators into those of the officials who, having all the means of life under their control, were able to hold undisputed sway. The House of Commons was now closed down, and not only the Conservative but the Labour Party was "liquidated." In order to prevent any attempt on the part of the dismissed members to organise an Opposition outside Government circles, all those who had sat as Conservatives were banished, together with any of their supporters who were held to be dangerous enemies of the Socialist regime. On the list of exiles was found the name of James Brandon.

Forced therefore to leave the country, Brandon, together with Kavanagh and Rosamund, found a refuge in the Villa Pax Mundi, where, amidst sunshine and vineyards, they watched sadly from afar the final eclipse of the British Empire.

Others of their fellow-countrymen, less fortunate, wandered poverty-stricken about the world ; there was no country to be found ready to take up the part played in the past by England towards the refugees flying from social revolution. Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Parbury, after knocking in turn at all the frontiers of Europe, and finding a welcome nowhere, were finally received unwillingly by the Eskimos.

Meanwhile, the former "Labour" leaders who had

remained in the country, found themselves reduced to the ranks, obliged to seek jobs as best they could in nationalised industry. Hanley, in despair at seeing the reality to which his dreams of a Socialist Paradise had led, flung himself into the river from Westminster Bridge.

This state of affairs was not at all to the taste of those members of the Labour Party who had fared sumptuously in the bad old days of the Capitalist system. Accordingly, Messrs. Bagnall, Pudsey, and Renton decided that the English climate was no longer suited to their health, and bethought themselves of seeking refuge with some of their friends abroad. Who would be more likely to befriend them than General von Rauschenberg whose programme they had carried out so faithfully ?

One summer's day the trio arrived in Stolzenbach and sought an early interview with His Excellency.

"So ?" he said, glaring at them from under his bushy eyebrows. "For what have you come ?"

"We have come to claim your protection. Our own country has become uninhabitable. We wish to live in Germany and to become German citizens."

"Germany has no use for traitors," answered the General, and turning to his Jäger he said abruptly :

"Take these dogs out and shoot them !"

Which was done.

The fiery General had found out his mistake at last. Like many another Continental foe of England he began to find himself hoist with his own petard. The tide of Bolshevism which he had helped to direct against the Allies now threatened to invade his own country.

For with the downfall of the British Empire the

whole structure of civilisation had been shaken to its foundations, and even those who had hated it for its greatness now trembled for their own safety. In France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, the Communists began to gain the upper hand. Spain declared a Soviet Republic. Japan, undermined by Bolshevist propaganda, defended itself desperately against the combined attacks of Russia and China.

In India, with the withdrawal of the British Army and Police, fierce racial riots broke out ; soon it was war to the knife between the Moslems and Hindus. In Palestine, no longer under the Protectorate of Great Britain, the Arabs turned upon the Jews ; in South Africa, Dutch and British settlers alike found themselves faced by a rising of the black races ; the United States by an anti-Anglo-Saxon coalition of the alien elements that made up so large a proportion of their population.

The whole world rushed towards chaos.

The Revolution, like Saturn, was eating its own children. The thousands of writers, speakers, artists, propagandists, who had spent their energies in undermining the structure of civilisation, found themselves being gradually buried underneath its ruins. This was no return to Nature, no clean sweep such as they had pictured, but a squalid mess amidst which they wandered trying to pick the means of existence from beneath the wreckage. Powerful to destroy they had no conception how to set about the work of reconstruction. They had killed society and could not live upon its corpse.

Even the Zodiac had overreached itself. Events had moved too quickly for its reckonings. Accustomed to know beforehand what was going to happen and

therefore how to turn everything to profit, the Twelve now found themselves unable to keep pace with the changes taking place simultaneously at all points of the globe. They had wanted revolutions, but ordered revolutions exploding like time fuses at the appointed moment. They had wanted wars, but wars carried out on fixed lines, of which they could calculate the outcome, not sporadic wars breaking out here and there like heath fires in all directions at once. They had wanted to destroy the British Empire, but only in so far as it was British, preserving the framework so that they might take it over. They did not want it reduced to scrap-iron of which no use could be made.

For the Zodiac had set out to rule the world and they had come to reign over ruins. The disciplined organisation they once held at their disposal had been broken up, their agents and agitators, formerly brigaded and prompt to obey, had been reduced to a disorderly rabble. The industries they controlled had been thrown out of gear. The spider's web of finance they had spread out all over the world was breaking at every point. The fabulous wealth they had amassed had turned to dust ; their stores of gold could purchase nothing. Of what use to Virgo were munition works, coal mines, and railways in a dozen different countries, when the workers in them could not be depended on for a moment ? How was Aries to carry on his operations in Wall Street if the New York Stock Exchange had closed down ? How could Scorpio reap the benefit of the boycott of British goods in the East when India and China were in a state of anarchy ? How was Sagittarius to ring up Buenos Ayres if the Argentine telephone system had been put out of action that day by revolutionaries ? And how were Libra,

Gemini, and Aquarius to project thought over a demented multitude? The passivity on which they depended for mass propaganda had been dispelled; men were thinking at last, thinking furiously, for the day of words was done and grim realities stared them in the face.

It was then that from an obscure centre in Italy the secret of the Zodiac was broadcasted to the world; the names of the Twelve and their scheme of world power were published in a score of languages. Then the tide of human passions that the Zodiac had set in motion turned against themselves. Their agents in the Kremlin, no longer able to maintain discipline in the Red Army, were massacred by mutineers from within its ranks; peasant riots and pogroms broke out everywhere. In New York, Oscar and Isidore Franklin were lynched by a maddened crowd; in London Cancer was shot by a hungry workman; a bomb blew Pisces to bits in the streets of Cairo. Stricken with terror, Gemini swallowed poison, Aquarius blew out his brains, Libra died of shock. Gradually all the Twelve were removed from the earth's surface. The Sun and Head of all lost his reason.

The world they left behind them was in chaos; civilisation had been set back a hundred years. But the power of the Zodiac was ended. Humanity was free to work out its own salvation.

THE END